

PENTECOST XIX

Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. ' Mark 10: 30

I was having lunch with an Episcopal friend and colleague the other day, and I said, 'the Revised Common Lectionary has some rough stuff in it.' He said, 'Yes, a couple of times recently our priest in New Hampshire has gotten into the pulpit and said, *this stuff is hard to preach on.*'

For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins. God speaks the word to Amos. Indeed the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. That's Hebrews. And then the Gospel, with Jesus' promise that if we forsake our families we will receive *fields with persecutions* as our reward – well, thanks a lot!

Indeed, renunciation comes front and center for Jesus in Mark's Gospel. As long as Christians are witnessing to the Gospel in the world, we can expect persecution, and Mark does not ignore or trivialize the pain and danger. Mark's church was shadowed by the persecutions and turmoil of the 60's of the Common Era, when Peter and Paul were martyred by Nero in Rome. Christians in Palestine were caught between Jews and their pagan neighbors when the Jews revolted against Rome. To Mark, following Jesus and bearing the Cross of persecution are one and the same.

I suspect, therefore, that Jesus probably did not say the words that Mark puts into his mouth here. Certainly, people may have left their blood families to follow Jesus during his lifetime, but that did not necessarily mean a permanent break. It didn't mean conversion, for example. Jesus' followers were not asked to change religious affiliations, as it were. But by the time Mark writes, the choice to become a Christian often meant a painful and permanent rendering of one's ties of origin. Conversion to Christianity meant, often, leaving the faith of your parents and ancestors and spouse, and leaving *them* as well. No light or laughing matter.

I won't be here next week because I'm going to Jacksonville Florida to celebrate a wedding. Last winter I got an email from a young man in Jamaica Plain whom I'd never met, who wanted some information. He said that he was in a crisis with the Episcopal

church of his childhood because he wanted to be married in that church but had been told – or perhaps, his stepfather had been told – that he couldn't be married there because the minister who baptized him 30 years ago did not subscribe to the Nicene Creed.

Well, this is theologically bogus. This was sorted out in the Fourth Century. The validity of a sacrament does not depend upon the character or creed of the one who celebrates the sacrament. And I told the young man that when we met. I explained our theology of baptism: there are no second baptisms, and we baptize into a community. *No drive-by baptisms*, I said. But the situation seemed intractable. "It's the South," he kept telling me

I grew quite attached to this young man as we talked, and as he told me the complex and painful story of his family, told me about his love for his Vietnamese Buddhist fiancée, and his desire to be married in the church where he had grown up, served as an altar boy, and so forth. So finally I said, *well, either we can lie or I can baptize you, again, in my backyard, and I'll pick the second option.*

So we did that, right before I left for sabbatical. But the other part of the deal was that I was supposed to do the premarital counseling, as they would not be in Jacksonville for that to happen there. And in that process I became fonder of the couple and more involved with their lives' stories. At one point I suggested that they include in the wedding service a Buddhist reading to honor Cathy's tradition. *If I were doing the wedding...* I said. *Well, could you do the wedding?* they asked. *You're much more what we're looking for.*

So then we had to go through a song and dance about would the priest down there allow me to come, which turned out not to be a problem – the priest actually sounds quite relaxed, and I have begun to think that most of the weirdness here may not be in the church so much as in the guy's family. He has been very open and detailed about how much pain and, really, abuse, he has suffered at their hands, and they seem to be acting out their whacked-ness in every aspect of wedding planning, which is of course not so unusual. The couple told me, *It's no accident we both live 1000 miles from our families.*

At one point, I suggested, not entirely in jest, that we use this morning's Gospel as their Scripture reading. *Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age.* Or the portion of Luke where Jesus tells his hearers that anyone who does not hate father and mother, spouse and children, brother and sister, cannot be a disciple That really sounds harsh!

And the couple has wisely chosen some less controversial and incendiary readings. But the other night, in my study, the young man said to me, *the only three people who matter to me in this wedding are sitting right here. I've given up on all the rest of them.* That, too, sounds a bit harsh, and I know it's an exaggeration. But I also know something of the struggle and courage it's taken for him to separate from his family's extraordinary pathology and gain a reasonably healthy balance and integrity of his own. And that's why I'm going to Jacksonville, to help celebrate that.

Last week I preached a bit about the making of families, and this week, a bit about the unmaking of them. Or, rather, about the need to separate from the unhealthy, constricting dimensions of our families of origin, and reform ourselves as adults in a new image. For those of us who follow Jesus, we might be said to reform ourselves in the image of Christ.

Now, that doesn't have to mean something impossibly daunting. Let's say it means reforming ourselves with personal, mature integrity – integrity being a quality I value immensely. Any one of us who has *come out* in any way – and who among us has not? – has gone through that process. Whether we have come out as gay or lesbian, bi- or trans, whether we have come out, as I have, as an alcoholic, and earlier, when I defied family tradition and expectation by leaving my first husband, however we have *come out*, we have separated ourselves a bit from the death-dealing atmosphere that imposed secrecy or hypocrisy upon us. We have left an aspect of our “family” selves that became intolerably oppressive, and have moved a way into light and freedom.

This, I think, is something like what Jesus means when he says we have to lose our lives in order to gain them. We have to lose the part of our lives that is bound up in unreal expectations and false idols and images. We have to become more fully ourselves, the selves God means us to be. We have to move into a new freedom.

I had a rather uncanny experience last spring, a month or so after my mother died. I was running down by English High School, and I suddenly remembered something my mother had said to me about my grandmother, back in 1968 when I was teaching 8th grade English and history at the O.W. Holmes Middle School in Dorchester. “Granny doesn't really understand your life,” my mother said, “she just thinks you're down there in Boston, swirling around with all those protesters and Negroes.”

And of course, that's exactly what I was doing, and of course my grandmother couldn't understand it, and neither could my mother and father. They couldn't visualize my life, they couldn't understand why I had undertaken it or what it could possibly be

like. And, as I remembered that long-ago conversation, I felt for a moment strangely free. I realized in a startling and profound way that I had left behind, or more accurately, had *been left behind*, not only by my grandmother's generation, but also by my parents. I was no longer connected – on this earth – with those near and dear ones to whom I was, on some very fundamental level, so strange.

This was not a freedom I had imagined or invited. It was not a freedom I would have chosen – to have my mother die. It was, and is, a painful freedom. And it's paradoxical. Because while I may have seemed at times bizarre and alien to my parents, at the same time no one will ever know me so deeply or love me in the same way. I have a wonderful husband and daughter and granddaughter, and many caring and loving and insightful friends. But none of them can love me with the same blood intimacy as my parents did. No other human person, that is. Only God can. Only Jesus can.

I'm not sure I've been able to be very articulate about this. I am groping toward what I think it may mean when Mark has Jesus call us to leave our families for his sake. For us, here in 2009, this can't and doesn't mean that we literally abandon all that is familiar and nurturing about family life. But can, and I think does, mean that we must strive toward becoming most fully whom God is calling us to be, even – perhaps especially – when that becoming turns painful, costly, and lonely. Because it is then that we most truly comprehend who is standing with us, holding out to us the promise of eternal life.

Alleluia! Amen.