

Pentecost 3 (Proper 7A)
Trinity Parish Seattle
June 25, 2017

[Jeremiah 20:7-13;](#)

[Psalm 69: 8-11, 18-20;](#)

[Romans 6:1b-11;](#)

[Matthew 10:24-39](#)

This past week Betsy Severtsen, Nathan Clark and I were at the College of Congregational Development...

We came away with a project for ourselves and all of us here at Trinity to ready ourselves for children's ministry in our parish... After all, it is what we have said, over and over that we would do!

At every baptism of a child – or an adult for that matter – we make a promise. Remember what we always say? A question is asked: “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?” And we respond with a great big, “WE WILL!”

And then, that just might be the last time we think about that! But it shouldn't be! What might it actually mean for us to do all in our power to support these persons in their life in Christ?

We're eager to begin a process of educating ourselves – our whole parish! – on what it will mean, and what it require of us to take seriously the thing we say we will do when the little ones among us are brought to the font for baptism. You'll be hearing more about that in the coming weeks.

For the past few decades, Christian educators have been speaking less of “Christian education” and more of “Christian Formation” – that is, the process by which we help to give form and substance to the lives of people as they are shaped more and more into the image of Christ. It's less about pouring knowledge into children's heads and more about helping them to learn and experience the way of Jesus as the way of life.

Now, as I listened to the words of the Prophet Jeremiah this week, it occurred to me that this is most definitely NOT where we will start with children! Or perhaps even with adults who are new to the faith! Jeremiah was a prophet of gloom and doom. He cried a lot. And he keeps saying to the Lord, “why is it that I have to say all these hard things to these people? You tell me to shout ‘Violence and destruction?’ – and they all just laugh at me and make fun of me! But if I *don’t* mention you and *don’t* speak in your name, it’s like a fire inside me that I just can’t hold in!”

And then there is today’s gospel from the tenth chapter of Matthew. It’s not a very happy scenario either! In fact, if you think the Christian life is just another way of talking about how everyone should be nice to each other and get along, and how to make children obedient to their parents and all that good stuff, you most certainly will not want to read this one to your children! It’s set in the context of Jesus talking to the disciples about how difficult this way is going to be for them. As their teacher, he says to his followers, “if they think *I’m* the devil, then they’re really going to come after you!” But he tells them not to be afraid, because there is a bigger story here.

And he goes on to talk about division within families – certainly not the kind of family values gospel we often think being a Christian is all about! Did you hear those words? Did you wince at them like I did? Did you want to cover your children’s ears when they were read?

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

"For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes a number of other disturbing statements about family.

- Man wants to first bury his father – Jesus says, “let the dead bury their dead.” (Matt. 8:21-22)
- Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death... (Matt. 10:21)
- “Who is my mother? And who are my brothers?... whoever does the will of my father in heaven, they are my brother and sister and mother.” (Matt. 12:46-50)
- Those who forsake houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mothers or wife or children or lands for my sake shall receive a hundred fold and shall inherit everlasting life. (Matt. 19:29)
- Call no man ‘father’ on earth: for only one is your Father, which is in heaven. (Matt. 23:9)

Not the family values you thought the Bible was all about, is it?!

What is this all about???

On one level what we’re dealing with is cultural and linguistic. Ancient Semitic cultures and languages didn’t make the same distinction between results and purposes that we do. So, for example, when Jesus says “I came not to bring peace, but a sword,” or “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household,” it doesn’t mean that Jesus got up one morning and said, “I’m going to see what a mess I can make of families today!” It wasn’t that he was purposefully seeking to create all this disturbance in families or in society – but that is exactly what actually happened. When people came to believe in Jesus and follow him as Lord, it just naturally put them in conflict with other institutions and loyalties, whether family or the whole larger political realm. That was the result, whether it was the specific purpose or not. It was a well-known fact in the early church that when people came to faith in Christ, they sometimes had to make difficult choices – choices between their parents or spouses, and their following in the way of Christ. Sometimes values collided, and people had to decide, will I continue to live according to the old patterns, or will I now live more deeply into the way of love.

And that still happens sometimes today, too, of course. And so what that means is that Jesus is saying to us, “even our biological families – the one relationship that seems absolutely indissoluble – is not as important as the relationship we have with God.” And this was truly revolutionary thinking.

And if we dig just a little deeper, we recognize that these troubling statements about family are also about Power, according to John Dominic Crossan, who is a noted biblical scholar. “The father-dominated family was a social unit fundamental to the order of the Roman Empire. Referring to these passages, Crossan writes in one of his books (*The Historical Jesus: Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*), [and says] ‘Jesus will tear the hierarchical or patriarchal family in two along the axis of domination and subordination.’ Jesus is challenging the traditional family hierarchy” (Sojourners, June 2008, p. 49) and offering a different way of thinking about family that is based not in the traditional hierarchies of power and domination, but in love and mutuality and service.

And, of course, this is consistent with all of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom or realm of God. Power and domination and subordination of one person by another, whether physical or psychological, whether in the family unit itself, or in the society at large, is to become a thing of the past. In its place is a new world, a new way of being, in which the meek are the blessed ones, the merciful shall see God, the first will be last and the last first, where children are welcomed into the company of important people – a world in which “father” is patterned not after the household-dominating Roman father image, but after the loving, generous, merciful, compassionate God whom Jesus called “Father.”

It’s also consistent with what we know about our vocation as baptized Christians, which is to “die” to the old ways – “the way of sin and death” as the baptismal liturgy puts it – and rise to newness of life. St. Paul was very graphic in his baptismal imagery in today’s reading from the Epistle to the Romans:

“We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. “ (Romans 6:3) Imagine, if you will, that when we are baptized, we are proclaiming the death of all the old systems of power and domination that lead us and our world ultimately to death, and we are rising to walk instead in the way of love.

Following his very un-family values-like comments, Jesus says (in words that foreshadow his death), “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

The cross was one of Rome’s instruments of intimidation and control and domination. They used crosses to punish rebels and instill fear and submission in the oppressed. But Jesus, by accepting death on a cross, uses the cross to expose the cruelty and injustice of those in power and instill hope and confidence in the lives of the oppressed. (McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, p. 124). He turns the meaning of the cross on its head, and makes it a sign of self-giving love, instead of domination and control.

That’s what baptism is for us. It marks us as people who walk in a different way – the way of self-giving love – and who say “no” in our words and in our actions to the fatally flawed systems of this world, in favor of the new and living way of God’s reign. That’s what we commit ourselves to in baptism, and that’s the journey for which we seek sustenance each time we participate in this Eucharistic meal.

As we think about the formation of our children in the way of Christ, we’re talking about giving them access to this new paradigm, both by modeling it for them in our own lives (which is the most important thing we can do) and by teaching them the story of Jesus, the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, the one who turns the ways of this world upside down and shows us the way to true life.

We have a wonderful opportunity before us as we embrace the formation of our children in this way of life. And I just have a feeling that it will help shape all of us more deeply in the process.