



SUNDAY SERMON

Sacrament Match-up: Marriage vs. Baptism

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 14, verses 25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

We don't have many weddings here at St. Columba's—which is ironic, since we're known as such a family-oriented kind of parish. We take children and youth formation seriously around here, and we're blessed to have lots of families, of all shapes and sizes, and more kids running around on Sunday mornings than you can count. Given how family focussed we are around here, I expected to be doing lots of weddings when I joined the staff five years ago—and it turns out I've done one in that whole time.

It took me a while to realize that Tenleytown is a great place to move after you have kids, or when you're about to have a kid, and most of the time, when you're about to have a kid, you already got married somewhere else. Probably in the downtown parish closer to where you lived when you were single. Families show up ready made here at St. Cs. So much for my second career as a wedding pastor.

What we do have a lot of around here is baptisms—so many baptisms in fact that we can't fit them all into the four traditional Baptism Sundays throughout the church year. This coming program year at St. Columba's, we have not four, but eight days set aside for baptism.

So—why am I going on about marriages and baptisms after that somewhat harsh teaching from Jesus we just heard in the Gospel of Luke? Well—I think these two sacraments, Marriage and Baptism, are a key to understanding what's going on in the two New Testament readings we heard this morning.

First, in his letter to Philemon, Paul wrote about what should be done with the slave Onesimus, but this isn't an abstract argument about slavery: everything Paul writes in that letter depends on what has happened to Onesimus in Baptism.

And Jesus starts out his message in the Gospel of Luke by letting us know what he thinks of families—and by implication, marriage—which, maybe surprisingly, isn't a whole lot. It's an interesting sacrament vs. sacrament match-up, and we can learn something about both sacraments by comparing and contrasting what they are supposed to do, and how they go about doing it. And along the way I'll try to dig into Jesus' "family values": why was he so negative about marriage and family life?

Let's recap what Jesus says at the beginning of the Gospel: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Ouch. So—to state the obvious, it seems that Jesus was deeply skeptical about the families he saw around him in his own day.

Continued

DATE

The Sixteenth Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., Sept. 4, 2016

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

READINGS

Jeremiah 18:1-11
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

Now, despite the way Jesus is sometimes portrayed in the media or popular imagination, he himself was not married. He was not a regular, family guy, that Jesus. Jesus was a little weird. Just let that sink in for a minute.

Jesus was weird, not just by our standards; Jesus would have been considered especially weird by the standards of his own day. Fulfilling family duties, having children, and a household, was very much at the heart of what it meant to be Jewish. A rabbi who wasn't married would have stood out. But for Jesus, having a wife, and children, and a household, would just have been a distraction from his big idea—the Kingdom of God.

Jesus had a vision that transcended time and broke down the barriers erected by tribe and class, barriers that he saw were just being reinforced by the patriarchal system of marriage and family life that existed in his culture.

Jesus was rejecting that narrow system of patriarchy, a system that kept women subservient and concentrated too much wealth into too few hands. I think that's what he means when says that we must hate father and mother, wife and children: Jesus has rejected these earthly ties in exchange for a larger vision of equality within the universal household of God, and he wants us to do the same. He wants us to reject the conventional worldly script we've been handed for something altogether different, something more free and empowering for all people, not just the male head of household.

And in Jesus' view, marriage belongs to the old order, the way of the world which is passing away. Now here I'd like to pause for a moment and consider one of the peculiar aspects of the sacrament of marriage, and how it differs significantly from the sacrament of baptism. What kind of a change does marriage make in your life, vs. the kind of change that baptism makes? As much as you might love your spouse, and as much as your marriage might mean to you, the weird thing about marriage is that it has this self-destruct mechanism built into it.

It's right there in the marriage service. The vows the spouses make to one another end with the somewhat ominous phrase: until we are parted by death. I will love you, I will hold you, etc etc, until we are parted by death. Till death do us part, in the older version. However much marriage changes us, whatever it does to us, it's just for the time being, it's only for now. It's a situational change, not an ontological change.

"Ontological" is one of those 50-cent theology words that you use a lot in seminary, but it just means "being"—in a theological context "ontological" means something like being itself or the deep substance of a thing. The thing that makes you who you are. And here is the thing to understand about baptism vs. marriage: baptism is a sacrament that does mark an ontological change, a change in your being itself, in the deepest substance of who you are. And unlike marriage, baptism doesn't stop at death: in fact, the change that we mark in baptism can never be undone. Your baptism marks the reality of you as a child of God, adopted by God into his household. And we really mean it when we say that you are sealed and marked as Christ's own forever. That's a real forever, an infinite forever; maybe the only real forever that exists. You belong to God — full stop.

And that's the kind of change that Paul is talking about in his letter to Philemon about the slave Onesimus. Onesimus has escaped from his master Philemon and fled to Paul for help. Due to Paul's influence, Onesimus has become a follower of Jesus. And in becoming a follower of Jesus, Onesimus has undergone an identity transformation at the deepest level— an ontological, permanent, forever change. Formerly, Onesimus was a slave—but now, he is a child of God.

Paul lays it on thick with Philemon, saying how much Philemon's service to the church means and how much Philemon's love and encouragement have refreshed others. But Paul is really just setting up Philemon for his quite forceful demand, that Philemon should take back Onesimus—but this time, "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother." And Philemon should understand this transformation in Onesimus not just spiritually, "in the Lord," but, as Paul says, also "in the flesh." Paul's message to Philemon is this: you no longer own Onesimus' soul or his body—instead you are both now brothers under the true Lord and owner of us all, Jesus.

In this letter to Philemon and elsewhere throughout his letters, Paul was clear on the radical notion that becoming a follower of Christ enacts a radical identity transformation in us. In baptism, we become God's children—and it is this identity by which God knows us. God does not care about the human identities we construct for ourselves or impose on one another: to God we are not Jew or Gentile; we are not slave or free; we are not husband or wife or even man or woman. All of these human identities will pass away, and the only identity left will be the one God gave us in baptism—child of God.

And there is a beautiful and subversive equality in that identity which resists all the worldly ways we like to divide ourselves into greater and lesser, powerful and powerless. In God's eyes, we are all the same, all equally deserving of God's overflowing and abundant love. It is up to us, as God's family on earth, to remove any human-made impediments to this love and work towards the day when everyone will hear and know that God's blessing and God's love is for them. That they too belong to God, marked with his love, forever.

Amen.