

We Need the Holy Spirit to Help us Create the Family of Today

A sermon preached by the Rev. Martin L. Smith at St. Columba's Episcopal Church, Washington, DC, on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 5, 2010. Based on Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Philemon 1-21, and Luke 14:25-33

IF WE DIDN'T BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, Christianity would be something of a nightmare because it would seem that Jesus' message was something frozen in time on the pages of the Bible, a message from the past that we had to take directly and apply literally to our own lives unchanged. Imagine if we seriously believed that to be faithful followers of Jesus we had to slavishly take as a rule the counsel he gives in today's gospel, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister, and yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple"!

What horrible consequences would ensue if we took this psychologically as an instruction to resent, abandon or rebuff our loved ones, and to despise one's own life and gifts and be indifferent to them! And what a repulsive tyrant Jesus would turn out to be if he jealously required our exclusive attention and demanded that we ignore the needs of our families! That is why the Holy Spirit is so important. First of all, the Holy Spirit is the ally of true remembering, and so with the help of the Holy Spirit we remind ourselves that this teaching is not a weird incitement to hate valid for all time, but Jesus' words to would-be followers who imagined that they could tag along with him as he made his way to Jerusalem, as a kind of intriguing adventure, something to be done for kicks, out of curiosity, or impulsively in the flush of short-lived religious fervor.

Jesus had to scare them into realizing the danger they would be putting themselves into, if now, late in the day, they publicly associated themselves with him. The clash with the authorities once they reached the Temple was likely to result in his being framed and handed over to execution as a rebel. Who knows what fate lay in store for those who were tarred with Jesus' brush? Only those prepared to sever themselves from their families, and risk ending up on death row in Jerusalem, should join the disciples now. And in Aramaic, a language built on idioms with black and white

contrasts and lacking shades of gray, 'hate' means something like 'throw away.' Jesus in a way is being compassionate in this violent speech: he is telling casual followers to sit down and calculate whether they are actually willing to join him on a one-way journey to the gallows. Don't bid your families goodbye today as if you were going off for a jaunt, a fascinating passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem with the celebrity Nazarene prophet! To follow me at this juncture is to say goodbye to everything and everyone you hold dear, Jesus warns them with savage honesty. So for God's sake think twice! Count the cost!

So we don't have to rack our brains to work out what it means to hate our families. The Holy Spirit has plenty to tell us about where our duties and joys lie today, in radically different circumstances, and for most of us radical faithfulness to Christ will lead us in quite different directions. Faithfulness to Christ won't be a matter of trying to force his words onto our lives as a kind of rigid template. The Holy Spirit demands our creativity.

In fact, the Holy Spirit might be really prompting us to reflect that in order to be truly in tune with God's desire today, we might need to imagine Christ saying something to us that seems almost the opposite of what he is recorded as saying in today's passage. Today we really have to be creative in learning not how to hate our families, but how to love them genuinely. And families today in our culture are not what they were fifty years ago, and they certainly bear almost no resemblance to what families were like in Jesus' day. The family unit has shrunk dramatically. Over forty per cent of the population live alone as singles. Half of all marriages end in divorce. A huge proportion of children in western societies are now born 'out of wedlock' a phrase that has become quaint and antiquated in the space of a single generation.

And then there is the astonishing increase in life

expectancy. Huge numbers of us can now expect to live until our late eighties and nineties, so that our children will still be relating to us and involved in our welfare when they themselves are in their sixties and even seventies. Nothing remotely like this has ever been seen before in human society. In the Mediterranean world of Jesus' time, it is unlikely that more than one in twenty human beings reached their sixtieth birthday. Already, the stresses arising from this new longevity are piling on to other burdens. Middle-aged people have long lasting responsibilities towards their children and grandchildren, often with the added complexities resulting from divorces and remarriage, and at the same time long-lasting responsibilities to their own aging parents. How much can one take on?

It is hardly any surprise that so many people are taking up the cry "family values" in bafflement and horror at the rapidity with which traditional patterns are collapsing, and many try to promote as a perennial religious ideal to which we must return a glamorized version of the middle-class nuclear family remembered nostalgically from the 1950's. If we think that is very implausible, we can still empathize, as we don't know ourselves where things are going.

If we didn't believe in the Holy Spirit, we would be up the creek as religious people, because we can't take off the shelf pre-packaged sets of spiritual instructions about our family

lives. We haven't got as legacies from the past, templates that work for unprecedented situations, and shifting social patterns that are evolving faster than our capacities to adjust.

So a lot depends on whether we do believe in the Holy Spirit. Personally I hate it when I hear people pooh-pooh the doctrine of the Trinity, as a kind of musty orthodoxy from the past that we have outgrown. I literally hope to God that God is in fact Trinity, Parent, Offspring and Holy Spirit. Otherwise you can keep your Christianity. I do believe that God is our true and Original Parent, and that, as the letter to the Ephesians teaches, all the families of the earth are named after that Original Parenting. I do believe that God is Offspring, so that God could actually become our true companion made flesh in Jesus, committed as one of us to the blood, sweat and tears and to the joys of being human. And I do believe that God is Spirit, that God is Active Inventiveness and Imaginative Creativity, who makes things new, and helps us take part in creating newness. And, by God, we are going to need God the Holy Spirit to forge new patterns for family life and new patterns of interrelationship that are loving and enduring and just and supportive in a changing world. Only if God is Holy Spirit can we believe in the future patterns of family life that are going to spring out of God's creative desire, and offer ourselves to be pioneers and exemplars.

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