

Proper 8C I Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 Luke 9: 51-62 Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Jesus does not hold his punches. Any honest reading of his hard sayings will lead any open-minded reader to this conclusion.

After such an honest reading we could also conclude that Jesus would not have made a good parish pastor.

So much of that job depends on making it easy for people to come to church and rewarding for them to stay.

The basic idea of the church growth experts is that one ought to find out what people are looking for and to give it to them so that they will stay and not go down the street to the next church.

It makes one think of the Brexit vote of three days ago - ask them what they want and then give it to them, no matter what!

In the view of some, a well-run church is like a well-run home, where members count on regular meals in pleasant surroundings, with people who generally mind their manners.

Rather like a perfect Norman Rockwell Illustration.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with these depictions except that they clash with the hard sayings of Jesus such as we have in the gospel for today, and indeed throughout the gospels.

If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation there might be about five or six left there on Sunday mornings and chances are most of these would be fooling themselves.

Jesus might greet newcomers by saying, “Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take about everything you have and come before everything else that matters to you. A lot of people have been here and then counted the cost and you can see they are not here anymore. Why don’t you go home and think it over before you get in over your head.”

Far from trying to make it easier for people to follow him, Jesus points out how hard it is.

Today’s gospel story is unique to Luke. In the 9th chapter after foretelling again his coming death, teaching that greatness is like a child and like welcoming the least, and rebuking John for wanting to stop an exorcist because he is not one of them, Jesus plans to enter a Samaritan village and sends scouts ahead to prepare the way of entry.

But Jesus did not plan to stay in the Samaritan village because he was determined to arrive at Jerusalem. Luke says “his face was set toward Jerusalem.”

This is an affront to the villagers, a slight, but James and John view this refusal to provide hospitality as insulting to them, and want to get

satisfaction by “commanding fire from the sky.” For this Jesus roundly rebukes them.

Things are beginning to change. The hostility toward Jesus is building here. There is a break between the Jesus group and the normal, settled way of life among the people.

What Jesus then encounters is a series of disciples, who like Elisha, want to know the terms of the call and need to explore the possibilities of negotiation.

“I will follow you wherever you go,” says one brave soul, who then seems to have dropped by the wayside when he realizes that the Son of Man and his followers cannot count on foxholes and nests when they are weary. They will need to depend on the hospitality of others. Off-putting.

Then, another has the funeral of his father to attend to, to carry out the most important loving filial obligation. After all, burying one’s family members was considered one’s highest moral duty. And here Jesus rejects the importance of biological family. “Let the dead bury their own dead..!”
Scandalous.

Yet another one wants to attend his own farewell party before following Jesus to Jerusalem, so to ease the break with the family. And this is denied.

The kingdom needs proclaiming more than the dead need to be buried and farewells said to the family.

The half-hearted should not apply. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Demanding.

A reminder of what family life meant to ancient people might be helpful here.

Household was for the early Jesus group members a basic image of social identity. In the Mediterranean world of antiquity that extended family meant everything - source of one's status in the community, the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network.

Loss of family connection meant loss of these vital networks as well as connection to the land - the most serious losses one could sustain.

‘I will follow you wherever you go - but let me go bury my father - and my family is counting on having a final meal with me and saying their goodbye’s before I start to follow you.’

And the answer was no - ‘take your hand off the plow to look back and you drop out of the Kingdom journey.’

Jesus was in a tightening vise on this walk to Jerusalem, and he had no sympathy for people who tried to squirm out of it, using their family responsibilities as reasons for not following.

It was a hard road ahead and the writer Luke knew that Christians in his time were already being persecuted for following Jesus. To have a Christian

in the family was dangerous for everyone. One believer and the whole family could be arrested.

Make Jesus following Jesus your first priority, and everything else fell by the wayside - not because God took it away from you but because that is how the world works.

As long as the world opposes those who set out to transform it, the transformers will pay a high price.

Ask Martin Luther King Jr., Harry Wu, Nelson Mandela, or Aung San Suu Kyi. No one tangles with the reigning powers and gets away unscathed.

I think that is what Jesus wants us to know. He is not threatening us. He is loving us, as usual - refusing to lie to us, refusing to make his way sound easier than it is.

He wants us to know very clearly what it costs so that no one follows him under false pretenses - getting half way through building the tower and have to abandon it, go charging into battle without the troops we need to prevail.

For us, is it about being good, stable citizens or is it about changing the world?

Is it about creating a safe, caring environment where people's needs will be met or is it about living such a different way of life that those in authority get mad enough to do us harm?

Discipleship costs all that we have, all that we love, all that we are. If the world were kinder to its reformers, discipleship might be a piece of cake, but it is not, and Jesus does not want anyone to be fooled.

Even with this said, we are probably not very pleased by what Jesus is saying about the family, or what the oft superficial and saccharine conservative rhetoric refers to as 'family values.'

Neither Paul nor Jesus was very high on the family.

What Jesus says is certainly an antidote to provincialism, to a fear of the outside world.

No doubt it is also an important word for those distorted or abused by family relations, for instance, victims of abuse.

Jesus, and to some extent Paul, have removed the family from its unassailable, privileged position in the pantheon of the good.

However, Jesus did not despise the family, but he did redefine it. He called and formed what could be called a surrogate family that transcended the normal categories of birth, social status, education and power in the ancient world.

He inaugurated the church, the new family, and extended it to embrace all those who worked love and justice among the people.

For Jesus it was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you, but whose image you are created in - not a matter of the same last name or same address but who serves the same God.

That means that his family became huge beyond counting, with lepers and tax collectors and Roman centurions in it, with men who smelled of fish and ladies in gold brocade and hordes of noisy children.

As much as his ancestors may have mattered to him, Jesus' family was more like a collection of relatives from all over the place, gathered because of their allegiance to one Parent God, some from one family and some from another.

And in that new family they could learn the broader love and forgiveness they needed to live.

They certainly squabbled, but with Jesus as their Lord, they remained a family, his family, the one he lived for and the one he was willing to die for, though it ran a sword through his own mother's heart.

Those are his family values, and while they may send a shiver down our spines to hear that, there is good news here for those with the nerve to hear and embrace it

The gospel is not pabulum. It is powerful stuff that challenges the most sacred human ties. It is a new society of equals in Christ with the nerve to embrace others across all lines of division.

This vision is the plow to which we put our hands and from which we dare not look back.

And so, at this current moment when loyalty to only one's own kind, tribalism and selfishness, anxiety driven populism and nationalism is

increasing all around us - seen at least in part in the Brexit vote this week, and in our own nation in the ugly political rhetoric and policies of the far right – there is a call.

It is a call to gospel commitment and living. To work for widening this new family of Jesus across all barriers.

This new family, who as it's founder, lives for and even lays down it's life for the least and lowliest and un-welcomed other.

This is not a popular or easy call, but it is the call of Jesus.