

“Love God More”

Luke 14:25-33

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I don't know how they did it. **How did those first disciples of Jesus muster the courage to follow him?** The gospel accounts make it sound so easy: Jesus called and they followed. Peter and Andrew left their fishing nets (and everything) to follow Jesus; and James and John left their boat *and* their father, Zebedee, with it (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20). Levi left his tax booth. They left everything—their families, their homes, their livelihoods (Lk. 18:28)—all to follow Jesus and “fish for people” (Mt. 4:19).

Did they think life would be easier following the Messiah? Sure there were miraculous things happening—the cleansing of a leper, the healing of a paralytic, the calming of a storm, and the feeding of multitudes—but Jesus told them that there would be *suffering* (Lk. 21:7-19). He even said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Lk. 9:23-24). Did they hear what he said? **Cross.** *He said*, “let them deny themselves and take up their *cross*.” It wasn't a metaphor then. The cross was real wood and nails; cruel and inhumane. It was a real possibility. No one wanted to bear the cross. Yet suddenly, it seems, Jesus is sending out *seventy* disciples to share the good news (Lk. 10:1-12, 17-20).

And “[n]ow *large crowds* [are] traveling with him,” and he turns and says something to them (v.25). Did they hear what he said? **Hate.** *He said* that “whoever comes to [him] and does not *hate* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be [his] disciples.” This isn't exactly the message of Focus on the Family – “Helping Families Thrive.” What happened to “*honor* your father and mother” (Ex. 20:12)? It's likely that Jesus did *not* mean “hate” in the sense that followers should detest or despise others and themselves. It's more likely that Jesus meant that followers should disfavor or disregard others and themselves, and give preference to following Jesus, loving God. It was “a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from.”¹ In this sense, hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself means **loving God more than all else**. Loyalty to God takes precedence over everyone and everything.

It's hard because it goes against every cultural value and norm. **Loving God more than all else, redefines everything**—our sense of family, our view of material things, our ideas of success, our concept of life, and more. Following Jesus, we would be led to say things like, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” or “the least among all of you is the greatest” or “life is more than food, and the body more than clothing” (Lk. 8:21; 9:48b; 12:23). The trouble with redefining everything is that it “can and will necessarily involve some detaching, some turning away.”² No wonder Jesus said that “the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and *there are few who find it*” (Mt. 7:13).

At this point in Luke's gospel today, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem (Lk. 13:33) BUT by the time he is crucified at the place called the Skull, the crowds have dwindled to a couple of thieves. Judas

has betrayed him. Peter has denied (knowing) him; even after saying, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” (Lk. 22:33). “*All of them* deserted him and ran away” (Mk. 14:50). One young man wanted to get away so badly he left his clothes and “ran off naked” (Mk. 14:52). Had they too not been crucified, I’m sure those two thieves would have left his side. No one followed. Realizing the cost was too high, they retreated to their families, fleeing from their crosses, leaving “towers” unfinished. It was Friday, and Jesus was practically alone. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he cried (Mt. 27:46).

This could have been the tragic end of a great story, but then *that Sunday came* and there was an empty tomb. He is risen! Not: He *was* risen! He *is* risen! Mysteriously, illogically, incredibly, those first disciples experienced Jesus as Risen Lord! And **in their experience of his new, continuing presence they found *grace to love God more, and to allow everything to be redefined in the light of that love.*** One by one, with newfound courage, empowered by God’s Spirit, they would *try again* to live the way of Jesus. They would love one another, pray for their enemies, bless those who persecuted them, welcome strangers and outcasts, and, yes, proclaim faith in the resurrection and in Jesus as Messiah and Lord, the Son of God; even if it challenged every value and norm; even if it put them at odds with their families, their communities, and their government; even if it cost them their lives!

This is the faith we have inherited. **It all sounds very heroic, romantic and idealistic, but it warrants caution.** There’s a danger in being so convinced of our beliefs, so zealous in our love for God that we neglect to love one another. **History is riddled with examples of Christians who engaged in hateful practices in the name of love, even God’s love.** They loved God and degraded women. They loved God and enslaved Africans and African Americans. They loved God and waged violence on Jews. They loved God and expelled gay people. ***They loved God and they hated people.*** They detested and despised others not for the love of God, but for the love of their beliefs or opinions, which often had nothing to do with the way of Jesus.

Many of those attitudes and practices continue today in one form or another. They even show up in those punny church marquee messages—e.g., “EXPOSURE TO THE SON PREVENTS BURNING.” It’s punny but not funny. I saw that sign and thought to myself, why not just be more direct and say, “BELIEVE IN JESUS OR GO TO HELL.” Then to my shock, I saw a sign that pretty much did, reading, “I KISSED A GIRL, AND I LIKED IT, THEN I WENT TO HELL.” **The problem, obviously, is that loving God as a Christian becomes synonymous with hating people.** And no matter how many times they repeat the mantra—“Love the sinner. Hate the sin.”—it still looks, sounds, and feels like hate. So when you’re driving down the highway and you see a sign that reads, “JESUS SAVES,” you can understand why some do not read it with thankful hearts.

Given that most of us have good intentions and mean well, how are we to discern whether we are loving God, or just our beliefs and opinions? We *are* called to follow Jesus and love God even if it challenges every cultural value and norm; even if it puts us at odds with our families, our communities, and our government; even if it costs us our lives. **But we are to do so without hating, despising, or injuring others!** Our love for God should not lead us to lift up “GOD HATES FAGS” signs like those of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas (who will be in Dayton on Oct. 4th). Our love for God should not lead us to collect and burn Korans on 9/11 like those of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida. 1 John 4:20 reads, **“Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”** For some it seems that it’s easier to hate our brothers and sisters whom we can see, and love God whom we cannot see. Yet scripture says that we must love *both!*

So love God more than more than your family, but love your family. Love God more than your life, but love your life. Love God and respect women. Love God and free the captives. Love God and oppose anti-Semitism. Love God and welcome gay people. **Love God and love people.** Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind **and** love your neighbor as yourself (Mt. 22:37-40). I cannot ask for more than that; and I cannot ask for less.

“Do this, and you will live” (Lk. 10:28b).

¹ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 181.

² *Ibid.*, 182.