

How to Hate Your Parents

Luke 14:25-36

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“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” *Luke 14:26*

I noticed during the recent campaign that Fred Thompson, presidential hopeful from my home state of Tennessee, made a quick whistle-stop at the Minnesota State Fair. His handlers at the fair made sure he peeked in on the “Butter Princess.” My source reports: “[The Butter Princess] is one of the fair’s main attractions, and it’s easy to see why. She is blonde and beautiful and all of 90 pounds—of butter. Carved that morning from a solid block, she smiles vacantly through the glass of her 38-degree display case.”¹

All the candidates—Barack, Rudy, Mitt, Hillary, you pick—employed astute advisors who’d been around the political block and knew why visits to the Butter Princess were important in the public eye. Image counts for a lot in politics. Every word and action and youthful gaffe are scrutinized by somebody on the other side, so it’s important to have a handle on how your horse is coming across in this long race to the finish line. Polls matter. A candidate should seem human, a regular guy or gal who eats corn dogs and funnel cakes; somebody who seems approachable, loves kids, and avoids saying stupid things that might bury the campaign by morning. You know all this. Candidates pay top dollar to a cadre of handlers who massage, position, and manipulate public image. You cannot get elected on image alone, but it certainly helps.

I’m pondering all this because sometimes I wonder if Jesus might have benefited from an advisor or two. I hope that doesn’t sound blasphemous to tender ears, but really now, *What is Jesus thinking today?* The very first sentence of our gospel lesson reports that “large crowds were traveling with Jesus.” Maybe he’s at the equivalent of the Galilee State Fair. Flocks of admirers surround him. The polls are up for the Lord, in other words. He’s a popular guy, and people hang on every word. That’s a sure sign of success in politics or sports or church life, correct? If the crowds are present, then things must be going well.

I was at the Florida State-Clemson game over the Labor Day weekend, my first visit back to my alma mater for a football game since the fall of 1978—29 years ago. Eighty-three thousand orange-clad fanatics packed in there for the Bowden Bowl. I got kind of misty-eyed when the team ran down the hill, touched Howard’s Rock, and the band broke into the “Tiger Rag.” But what if only 500 people had shown up in that spacious place? We’d have to conclude that something was terribly wrong in the Tiger Nation. The same is true in church life. We very often measure success through numbers—two numbers in particular, church attendance and offering dollars. When those are down, we wring our collective hands and wonder what we’re doing wrong. But have you noticed in the gospels that Jesus is not too concerned about public opinion? He doesn’t seem to have speech writers or appealing commercials claiming that discipleship will “solve all your problems.” Jesus seems to have missed the course

on image-projection. Conventional wisdom assumes that he'd *want* these large crowds to get even larger. Jesus, however, says a few things that probably thinned out the throng considerably by the end of the day. Twenty centuries removed, I'm cringing for the guy and almost wish the disciples had carried some sort of ten-second delay device.

Here's what he said that day, almost unbelievable advice about discipleship for ears like ours tuned to political platitudes and famous people putting their best foot forward. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother and family and, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross can forget about knowing anything about me. Whoever does not significantly downsize in the possession department can never follow me." Now each of those three statements is worthy of a whole series of sermons, but what I really want you to again notice about this speech is that Jesus said these offensive things at the *very zenith* of his popularity. "Large crowds" were hanging on his every word—maybe not 83,000, but enough to pay the bills and fund the movement and get this new thing called the kingdom of God up and running. Jesus would never have to rely again on a little boy's lunch of fish and bread to feed everybody. The disciples could just collect a free-will offering and have the thing catered.

There is a huge siren appeal in religious life for the leadership to try and make everybody happy. It's tempting, very tempting, for pastors and church council leaders to give people what they want and call that church. But if we take our evangelical cues from Jesus, words shared in church life may be so utterly honest, so free of populist manipulation, and so unhindered by opinion poll that we regularly risk offense in the name of the gospel. This is not to say that we become rude and abrasive on purpose, but it does suggest that we will be unflinchingly honest about what discipleship and life in the church does (and does not) mean.

It is almost unthinkable, for example, for anyone (even pastors) to question participation patterns in most Lutheran churches I know. We prefer a ministry of hand-holding and sympathy and "understanding" in all behaviors rather than asking someone out of care and concern, "What's kept you away from the Lord's table for the last six Sundays?" or "Why did you decide out of the blue to up and leave your spouse for somebody else?" or even: "I've missed you. Is anything wrong?" Some might say we should never risk such things because it's none of our business. The truth in America is that we have a tacit and almost holy agreement which is very close to this: "You stay out of my life, and I'll stay out of yours."

One of the reasons I love Jesus is that he refuses to play games in order to further his popularity. His words today may seem a little over the top. We may wish that Jesus had had a speech-writer, a good editor, to soften the blow and explain his real meaning. But all in all, he's just telling the truth. He's being honest about the cost of discipleship. "First, sit down and estimate what signing on with me is going to cost you." First, *sit down*, he says, think hard about this, because you may not want to be *standing up* when the life I have in mind for you really sinks in.

Jesus says that unless the cross is at the center of our lives, we're playing at church. He says candidly and forcefully that possessions can possess us. Jesus demands a practical priority in our lives, even surpassing the commitment to those in our family. Why does he seem so unswerving here? Because he knows that we can suffocate one another in the name of love. He knows that we can be no real good to family members unless we love them with the love and wisdom of Jesus rather than with our own best

efforts. He knows that even the gift of family can become an idol. (By the way, don't let the word *hate* trip you up here. It's not the same as saying the venomous "I hate you." It's a word denoting priority, primary allegiance.)

Jesus is on the road. Large crowds were traveling with him—some of them undoubtedly troubled and confused, looking for something to make life go down a little easier. Jesus refuses to define discipleship according to the least offensive common denominator. Instead, he tells the truth. And I suspect the crowds thinned out considerably that day. The polls were not kind to Jesus in the next morning's newspaper.

This story is an excellent cautionary tale for the church. How will we share Jesus with others? What motivates us and defines a "successful" church? Are we more concerned with numbers or depth in discipleship? What structures and programs need to be in place to help us grow in our following of Jesus? Or are we content just to count heads and dollars every Sunday and accept every behavior under the sun because it's just none of our business?

These are hard questions for Lutherans. There's a lot of hand-wringing about the state of the church nationally. Lots of blame to go around as to why we're in such a fix. But I think our central challenge is this: we're not honest with people about what following Jesus really means. "First, sit down," he says. Think hard about what you're getting into.

Maybe you hear that as judgment. I hear it centrally as real gospel care. "First, sit down." That's not bad advice. It's probably not a good idea to be standing when this discipleship speech really sinks in.

Note

1. Holly Bailey, "Grin and Bear It," *Newsweek*, September 10, 2007, 22.