

Week 3 (June 25) Matthew 10:24-39

This is a hard text to preach on no matter how things are going in the world. It brings with it a perspective that is particularly difficult for mainline churches. We see ourselves as those who hold together the values of our culture and those of the church. We want to see ourselves as those who preserve the best of both worlds. How many of us would tell children to turn against their parents as Jesus does in the section just before our reading? But Matthew has Jesus reject any cozying up to cultural values.

We need to think about the context of Matthew's church. In the first century, children remained under the control of the head of the household long after we think that is appropriate. In Roman culture, adult children were to remain under the control of their father until women married and then were under the power of the head of their husband's father and men remained under the power of their father as long as the father lived. Things were less stringent in Palestine and areas close to it. Still, children were expected to defer to parents all their lives. This created a problem for members of Matthew's church. It seems that many members of his church joined or remained members of the church against the will of others in their families. This led to significant ruptures in relationships. When the synagogue began to condemn the beliefs of the church, family members began to put pressure on church members to withdraw from the church. Thus, people were turned against their parents or their children.

So what is a church member to do? If they remain in the church, it seems they violate the command to honor their parents. But if they leave the church, they lose the blessings they experience through Christ. Matthew has Jesus assert that to deny him, means that they lose their salvation. Matthew will soon have Jesus turn away his own family and instead claim the community of believers as his real family (12:46-50). Matthew requires his readers to make the same choice. They may need to cut themselves off from their families to remain faithful, to follow the example of Jesus. The worthy disciple follows the example of the master.

We are fortunate that church membership seldom means that sort of alienation from family. But we should not lose the point. Following Christ makes stringent demands. Those demands include rejecting the values of the society and culture around us. At some times it is easier to see the conflict between what God would have the world be and what our social, cultural, and political views and values assert. But the conflict is always there. What counts as success in our culture seldom looks like the self-giving love seen in the life and death of Jesus. What our economic and political systems claim as the good seldom is consistent with taking up one's cross and following Jesus. Speaking out against the systems that dominate the world and the nation is risky business. Jesus knows it can get you killed. But he says not to fear those who can kill just the life you have; rather, fear the God who can take all life from you. This stark demand is startling. But it is a demand. In spite of how harsh it sounds, Jesus says that this demand gives life—even to the one who suffers because of it.