

To Look for Our True Life
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Sixth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 7, Year A, RCL
June 22, 2008

When we last left Jesus and the disciples (in last week's gospel passage), Jesus was giving directions to the twelve just before sending them out to preach the Good News, heal the sick, cast out demons. This is a continuation of those directions—and it's not getting any easier to hear, folks. Jesus' words are truthful and direct, but hardly the words of loving comfort that we'd rather hear. All this talk of being maligned, swords and division, along with carrying one's cross and losing one's life is hardly reassuring. However, it may be best to remember that Jesus is talking to his disciples in a very different time and place.

The Palestinian region was, at that time, occupied by Roman forces. Many persons would have willingly supported a movement or force that drove the Roman forces out, and established Israel's independence. To do something in opposition of the status quo would be quite embraceable in some circles. And what could be more subversive than the gospel, the coming of the kingdom of God, and going against those established, hierarchal family arrangements? So it may be that Jesus' disciples, while nervous and afraid of what was coming, were not so taken aback at his words as we may suppose. Indeed, they may have felt they were a rallying cry.

Nevertheless, these were, and are, not comfortable words. They are not intended to be. These are words of challenge, words of warning, words that are to remind us of who we as Christians are called to be—dedicated to Christ, of infinite value to God—and charged with delivering the gospel message in the way we live our lives.

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We are called, first and foremost, to be dedicated to Christ, to love God above all others. This is uncomfortably counter cultural, both in Jesus' time and in our time. In Jesus' time, God was to be the primary love, but in reality, the family influenced all—where and how you lived, who you married, who you were in society. Jesus was well aware of this—and reminded his disciples of it as well. Preaching and living the gospel was going to upset people, he warned, even persons in one's own family. But do not cave into pressure to smooth things over or soothe ruffled feathers, for to do so would be to deny the gospel message.

In today's world, families can still be influential—but so are other forces as well. All one need do is read the cards in the card aisle—"To my one and only love", "you are everything I need", etc.—or watch various TV shows or movies to get the message that romantic love is the ultimate form of love. Love of children, love of family, love of others is wonderful and noble—but love of God—weird! And even family is a much broader term now—in can include a close circle of friends, a tight-knit community at work, or school or church. We cherish these relationships and rightly so, for they can be supportive, and help inform our identity. But they are not to take the place of our primary relationship with God.

It is "Christian" that is to be the primary defining feature of our identity. Our baptismal promises include putting all our trust in Jesus' grace and love, to follow and obey him as Lord, to proclaim the Good news of God in Christ at all times. We are to live out our lives through that Christian lens. So when we are faced with bigotry at work or home, or asked to let things slide this one time, or go along to get along—we as Christians have a choice to make. And it can be costly—

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for it can cost a relationship, a job, a cherished community. But that is our charge, that is the promise we have made in our baptism. Being a follower of Jesus is just as challenging now as it was then—and Jesus knew it would be. That is why Jesus reminds of God’s love.

You see, even if we are asked to love God first and foremost, Jesus reminds us that God loves and cherishes us beyond all measure. “Do not be afraid”, Jesus says—for God knows and loves you so well that each hair strand is accounted for. You are more intimately loved and known than you could ever imagine. We may belong primarily to Christ, but it is through Christ the world was made. Since all belongs to God, we belong to one another as well. Therefore, to love another is not to love God less, but rather to love God all the more. Love is not a limited resource, after all; it is always in abundant supply. All we are asked to do in loving God first is to remember and honor the source of that love—loving as God does, being concerned about the things God is concerned about—mercy, justice, reconciliation.

Jesus last words in today’s gospel message feel cryptic—and true. They remind me, oddly enough, of a scene from the movie “The Sound of Music”—where the Captain Von Trapp and Maria confess their love for one another in the gardens. You remember that part of the story? Maria (a postulant in a convent) had been working as the governess of the Captain’s children, had fallen in love with the Captain (and he with her), but frightened by her powerful feelings, she fled back to the abbey. The Reverend Mother, upon learning the story behind Maria’s return, sends her back to the Captain’s house, with the words “If you love this man, it doesn’t mean you love God less”. Find out where this is going, if this is in fact where God is leading you, she indicates. And so Maria returns, and in the evening, the Captain searches for her in the garden.

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And when Maria brings up the Reverend Mother in their conversation—she mentions that the Reverend Mother said ‘you must look for your life’. “And have you found it, Maria?” the Captain asks. She says “yes, I think I have, I know I have”—and indeed, she has found her life—a life as a stepmother to numerous children, a wife of a loyal Austrian, a matriarch of now-famous family instead of a quiet life as a nun.

However, it is important to note that in finding her life, her true life, she had to give up the life she envisioned. She had to embrace God’s dream for her instead of her own; God’s will for her life instead of her will. This is what, I believe, is at the heart of Jesus’ words about finding and losing one’s life: a life governed only by one’s own will, concerned only with the self, is a life lost to God. You may have everything you ever wanted, but you will lack the one thing you need most—God’s presence in and through your life. But a life that is given up to honor God, to follow God’s dream for you, is a life that reflects the glory of God. It may not be an easy life, you may not have everything you ever wanted—and you may have to let go of long-cherished dreams or ideas. But in losing your life—your self-will—you will gain the true life that only God can offer.

So, let us not be afraid. Let us too listen to the Reverend Mother and follow Maria’s example, and look for our life—the true life offered by our loving God.