

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I've often been intrigued by "traditional family values." I hear religious and political leaders claiming "traditional family values" to bless their pursuit of specific policies, practices, and beliefs. While "traditional family values" may vary from person to person, many ascribe to an optimistic and, generally, never-realized set of values originating in the 1950s.¹ These values sometimes include a strong emphasis on opposite-sex marriage, personal responsibility, and protections for a fetus. In general, it's a belief that the family is the cornerstone of society, and that we should focus on the development of this specific type of nuclear family to best solve most social problems. "Traditional family values" have bloomed as an industry that derive their origin from religious values – more specifically, traditional Christian religious values.

Today, we go back to the beginning of "family values." We get to hear the beginnings of this movement right from Christ himself. Jesus started his lecture on "traditional family values" with verse 26 saying, "whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Well, there it is, Jesus, clearly, believes that family is the cornerstone of all things. With this text, I wonder if the marriage between Christianity and "traditional family values" is simply fake news.

¹ <https://curiosity.com/topics/traditional-family-values-were-invented-in-the-1950s-curiosity/>

But, who is this Jesus we hear of today? Maybe this whole story is inaccurately reported? After all, Jesus is exposing hatred. Where is our loving, peaceful, and gentle Jesus? It's true that we cannot get around the severity of Jesus's language. At the same time, we cannot throw away all of the teachings that call us to love one another or honor your father and mother. Instead, we must keep Jesus' statements in the context of Luke's gospel.

We heard Jesus preach a strong caution for clinging to death-dealing decisions. Jesus preached about living life abundantly. Jesus said that as a disciple, you are required to radically change your natural tendencies. To be a learner of Jesus' life-giving way, means trading in decisions based on "what's best for me," or even "what's best for our marriage, family, children" to gravitate towards making decisions on what is best for all.²

And, that is, so very hard. Incredibly, hard. Ridiculously, hard. In fact, as a people we have evolved to do the exact opposite. After all, we are a tribal species. We see it around us every day. Now that football is starting up again, I see the tribal mentality take root as I cheer for the Chicago Cubs to win The Stanley Cup. (Clearly, I'm a big sports fan.) And, sports are not the only place we see it. We see the tribalism within racial backgrounds, religions, political parties, nationalities, corporations, and generations. We have seen this tribal mentality exploited by emphasizing binary dimensions to encourage "us vs. them" thinking. We know that it is much easier to kill someone in war if there are clear "good" and "bad" people. It's easier to vilify a political party if they are the enemy to obliterate. Tribalism is the easy default for us today, and for the people sitting at Jesus' feet.

² <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/09/holy-hating.html>

And, today, Jesus offers another way. It's a difficult way. It's a way that gives up all that we have to share it with the larger good. It's beyond a simple tithe of our income. It's a movement to recognize our need to sacrifice our tribalistic mentality for the good of all. It's a rejection of the insider/outsider mentality. It's an abandonment of all-or-nothing thinking. It's a recognition that the binary we have been trained to believe is utterly against God's vision for our world.

This is the same vision that Paul was wrestling with in today's reading from Philemon. It's the hard work of imaging what Christianity looks like after dissolving hierarchical, classist, and tribalistic thinking. It's the recognition that in our existence we all are owed something and we all owe something. It's the understanding that we all are in this together. It's the belief that we all are children of God working together to do the imperfect work of loving one another because we were first loved by a God who expects nothing from us.

This past week, I've seen the impact of this fundamental shift. Following hurricane Dorian, the devastation in the Bahamas is unimaginable. The pictures are horrific. The death-count climbs each day. The tribalistic response would be to say, we don't have anything to give. We need to care for the Carolinas, we have our own problems, and while that's horrific, "good luck!" Yet, nations, organizations, and some random people have mobilized for the good of humankind to descend upon the islands to bring food, clear debris, and begin the long-road to recovery. This is the vision that Jesus bring into today's reading.

So too, it's fitting that today we are celebrating "God's Work. Our Hands," Sunday. It's our denomination's annual day of service that helps us live out the tagline of our

denomination in the ways we view our neighbors and the world we inhabit. It's a proclamation that all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do is by the sheer gift of God's creative power seen around us and in us. It's the gifts of plants and animals that energize our bodies for service. It's the gift of the many who have shaped us, empowered us, and sent us to be the hands of love for all. So, today, we'll enact Jesus's vision as we put together "bags of love" for those outside our tribe. The bags will remind us of God's vision to take what we have and give it away. To release all that consumes us, and to let go of the energy we spend towards our death-dealing detriment. Instead, we gather to recognize that we have a path of life that comes from acknowledging our common humanity. So, then, when we take a bag filled with gifts from our community and hand it to a homeless person, we make the declaration that God's vision is to move beyond the in-group of this congregation. When we share a "bag of love," we proclaim that we reject the lie that tribalism will bring us life. When we begin to see the humanity of the other in sharing a bag and a conversation, there we will see the eternal life that Jesus brings.

So, my friends, it's time to move towards God's meal at this table. For, Jesus's message today orients us to God's leveling work. And, so, at this table, the essence of God's being is equally given to all and for all. At this table, we are given a taste of justice. At this table, we are equipped to see God's presence in mundane bread and aromatic wine. So, friends, let us gather together in song, prayer, and love to share in these gifts, to recognize God's presence, and to respond to God's love with the fruits of our hands. Amen.