

13th Sunday, Ordinary Time, A

³⁷ “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;³⁸ and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.⁴⁰ “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.⁴¹ Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is righteous will receive a righteous man’s reward.⁴² And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.” (Mt 10:37-42)

Context. By this passage, we are well into the “Missionary Discourse” of Matthew’s gospel. Last week, in discussing the 12th Sunday passage (Mt 10:26-33) we noted that Jesus had sent the disciples on mission: we learn the names of the Twelve, hear of their commission (vv. 5-15), and, also, we hear warnings of the persecutions they will face (vv.16-25). It is after this warning that last week’s gospel, ominously opens with: “*Therefore do not be afraid of them.*” Yes, as Jesus warns, they will share in the life, mission, and suffering as will their Teacher. But, they are to trust the One who cares for the even smallest of creatures. The sparrows, which can be purchased for a pittance, are cared for by God (v.31) during their lifetime alive, but even their death is within the Creator’s care. All happens with “*your Father’s knowledge*” – and so the disciples are to trust.

The Sunday gospels pass over several verses, important to the context of the reading: ³⁴ “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword.*³⁵ *For I have come to set a man ‘against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;*³⁶ *and one’s enemies will be those of his household.’*” (Mt 10:34-36) One should not think of an actual sword, but rather an eschatological one that is reminiscent of the sword of Rev 6:4 that involves a division within families, households, and society.

Last Sunday’s gospel warns ³² *Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father.*³³ *But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.*” It is asking for a radical loyalty – not just obedience to the teachings, but to witness to Him before the world. The text reflects a real situation in Matthew’s church, where people sometimes had to choose between their family and their faith. In some apocalyptic views, the breakdown of family structures is part of the terrors preceding the eschaton. Matthew finds this a meaningful framework within which to interpret the experience of his own church.

The gospels have already introduced the idea of the “true family” of Jesus, those who are already members of “*his household*” in v.25. There Jesus had alluded to the community of disciples as Christ’s true family over against the charge of possession by Beelzebul and the disruptions of the ties of natural kinship. It is Jesus’ affirmation of the Christian community as the family of God where ties are closer and more demanding than natural family ties

Commentary

³⁷ “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;³⁸ and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

France notes, “Because of the division which Jesus provokes within families (vv. 34–36), true discipleship may bring a conflict of loyalties, and in that case, following Jesus must take precedence over the natural love of family (the Greek word is *phileō*, natural affection, not *agapaō*, the loving commitment which is a Christian characteristic). The Christian may even have to leave his family (19:29). The Lucan parallel (Luke 14:26) calls for ‘hatred’ of the family, but Matthew’s version correctly interprets this Semitic idiom (cf. Gen. 29:31; Deut. 21:15; Mal. 1:2–3) as an expression of prior loyalty or of choice

rather than of actual dislike. Jesus calls not for an unloving attitude, but for a willingness to put him first in the concrete situation where the calls of Jesus and of family conflict.”

The “loss” of family is bad enough, but there is also another cost that might be required of the disciples. What is interesting is that all the while Jesus is warning the disciples of the rough times that lay ahead, much of Matthew 9 described the mission of Jesus as a spectacular success. It is natural to think that the disciples expected their mission, in His Name, to be as spectacular. It is though from “left field” that Jesus then introduces the imagery of the cross. There is no soothing image or metaphor for the cross. The cross in the sign of Roman domination and the power over an occupied people. To take up one’s cross is the description of a death sentence being implemented.

The disciple is asked to place aside his or her own inclinations and interests, as well as those of the natural family, in order to truly follow Jesus. To give up the life one once held (even unto death) is the path to find the life that is truly worth living.

⁴⁰ *“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”⁴¹ Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is righteous will receive a righteous man’s reward.⁴² And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.”*

The dialog shifts from a focus on the disciples in mission, to those they encounter on the way. No doubt they have already met people along the way who enthusiastically greeted Jesus, and were willing to offer support and shelter to the disciples. They are perhaps not committed to the more rigorous demands of discipleship, but there is a positive attitude to the disciples and their mission. Jesus is happy to recognize this less committed level of following him as good and true, and which deserves and will receive its reward.

These verses are not simply a commentary on hospitality. Underlying such sayings, with their repeated implied reference to receiving the one being “sent”, is the principle later enshrined in the Jewish legal institution of the *šāliah*, the “one sent,” an ambassador or representative who was understood to have the full authority of the one who sent them. It is those who recognize such authority in the disciples who will welcome them, just as it is those who recognize Jesus as God’s representative who will welcome him. The unspoken corollary (but spelled out in Luke 10:16) is that those who reject the disciples on their mission are guilty of a far graver fault than merely lack of hospitality to a fellow human being; they are rejecting God. (France, 413)

Jesus’ words appeal to the deep, understood tradition of Israel. The “prophets” were those sent from God and are to be received as having the authority of God as regards the message sent. Jesus’ reference to the apostles as “prophets” is not new in this passage. In 5:11-12, he has already connected the disciples in their suffering and persecution to “*the prophets who were before you.*” In Israel’s understanding, welcoming (or reception) of the prophets would yield a prophet’s reward, i.e., the blessing conferred (1 Kgs 17:8-24; 2 Kgs 4:8-37). The parallel reference to the “righteous” is the same message. In Mt 13:17; 23:29 “prophets” and “righteous people” will again be paired as a way of speaking of the godly, there with reference to the period before Jesus’ coming.

There is sometimes a tendency to read “little ones” as to imagine children. But this is (apart from 18:6-14) a manner in which Jesus identified the disciples. France (415-6) writes: “Compare also the designation of true disciples as ‘little children’ in contrast with the ‘wise and intelligent’ in 11:25. So here there is no indication of a reference to children as such (though the saying would of course be applicable to a child no less than to an adult) or to any special sub-group; all disciples are ‘little ones.’ Those who go out to represent Jesus in a hostile society have no status, and may easily be pushed aside. It is only when people recognize the special significance of these ‘little ones’ through their relationship to Jesus and to ‘the one who sent him’ that they are willing to take them seriously, and so to welcome them with acts of basic

hospitality. The cup of cold water is an essential though inexpensive provision in a hot climate, an act of expected hospitality as well as of kindness. It is not much, but even that little ('just one,' representing *monon*, 'only,' emphasizes how little it is), because of the attitude it represents, is enough to bring the reward."

Sources

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