

Luke 14:25-33

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

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The Rev. Katherine Bush

Fran was the mother of a childhood friend, and Fran was notable for many things, including the unusual insistence that we children call her by her first name. Fran was also insistent that we not use certain words. She did not tolerate curse words, and while we were not exactly pint-sized potty mouths, I do remember taking some delight in pointing out to her that even in church, you could hear people say a three-letter word for donkey. We were, or thought we were, cleverly creative at finding loopholes and ways around her rules. She would not allow “shut up” or “stupid,” so my friend and I told each other to up-shut, and we looked up synonyms: ignorant and dense. Looking back, maybe it was all a ruse to expand our vocabularies? And Fran was also adamant that we should never say hate. It didn't matter the object: English peas or a bully or a homework assignment. We were absolutely not to say that we hated something or someone.

Yet here we are in church, and this time the word in question is not a barnyard animal in the nativity. Jesus is telling us to hate. Believe me when I tell you that I tried to write a sermon about pottery and Jeremiah, and then about the history of slavery and Onesimus. But I was taught to preach on the scripture that rubs at you. And these verses from Luke have rubbed a blister.

Because there is in this world a theology of hate. There is a tendency, no, way more than that, a drive to use belief and religious tenets and scripture to justify hate, to prop up bigotry, and to make space for violence. I don't have to make the case for you here, because surely you've witnessed, or worse, you've received the battering brutality that comes from the so-called righteous religious. That drive exists in every expression of faith; weaponizing faith seems to know no boundaries. As Anne Lamott reminded us, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." We use religion to create out-groups and enemies, designating some as unworthy and unwelcome. I say 'we' on purpose, because you don't have to have taken up arms in a crusade or a holy war to be tempted to wield faith as a cudgel, swinging it around in any direction. The theology of hate is devastatingly pervasive.

And so, I really wish Jesus had listened to Fran, or undoubtedly to his own mother, and not used certain words. “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.” Really, Jesus? This kind of talk makes me want to use some other words I'm not supposed to.

It rubs, and we must tend to the tender spot. So, let's take a look at this on a couple of levels. This particular Greek word in this form is rarely used, and that's nice, but it's still here. And I want to tell you next that it doesn't really mean hate, but it does: “hate or detest,” actually. But then, wait, there is this little twist: it's a comparative, so it can also mean to “love less than” or to “esteem less than,” and now that's on the way to being helpful. I can hear Jesus saying, “Love me more than these, love these less,” love God more than even father and mother and wife and children and brother and sister, more than your own life. It's still hard, still all but impossible, but it's an entirely different proposition to love God more rather than to hate one's own family and even life. And this call to “love more than” also sounds more like Jesus, doesn't it?

Not that he's been afraid to say hard things - may I refer you back to his bringing fire to the earth a few weeks ago, but we know that the ethic of Jesus is love, not hate. So, perhaps, as many a more esteemed Biblical scholar has said, this is intentionally hyperbolic. Jesus, in line with the tradition of Hebrew prophets, is trying to get our attention. And this wild, distorted claim is in line with those prophets before and since who have sometimes yelled to be heard above the yelling, sometimes going to extremes to break through the din and clamor. And this vignette did start with the swelling crowd. So many people were showing up for the spectacle, thinking they were joining a parade or even a march, and not imagining they were on the road to the cross. If Jesus wanted to thin the crowd and shake people out of their reverie, this harsh language might be just the thing.

Because following Jesus is not always or even often a parade; in so many ways, it's a long, slow funeral procession. And because asking anyone to love God more than family or possessions or life itself is the call, and that is an extraordinarily hard ask, some days seemingly impossible. He came to live a theology of radical and impossible love, not hate, and living in love is actually a much more challenging way to live in this world. The ethic of love is demanding. Love your neighbor, welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, care for the sick, and rather than hate anyone: love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, return no one evil for evil. And be sure, this is not just Jesus in the New Testament, but from the beginning of creation and all the way through all those wild, gesticulating prophets: love has been the call and work. Whatever strong language and stranger stories they might have used, the messengers of the God of love have been calling us in one direction all along. However we might have made our own justifications for excluding others, tried to implicate God in our bias, even fashioned our wars in so-called holiness throughout the centuries, the task all along has been not to hate, but to love. And there's the rub.

This is why a theology of hate is so twisted and is such an abuse of the faith, of any faith, and is so common. Sure, you can cherry-pick a verse here or there to support your own bigotry and prejudice. Of course, I can find half of a story to justify my own fears and discomfort with those who are "other" to me, to support my desire to retaliate, my need to demean in order to lift myself up. It's all there for the picking. But one of the ways we recognize that a theology of hate is not the way of Christ is precisely because it's so easy and so tempting. It's a lazy way of living in this broken world. Hating anything strange, letting fear drive our decisions, avoiding the hard work of reconciliation and of care; that's all too easy, effortless really. We can tell we're carrying a cross and not riding on a float by the heft and weight, by the steep climb, by the chafe and challenge. And by our need to be reminded again and again to love more.

At the cross, Jesus used his last breaths to minister to his mother, giving her into the care of his dearest friend, showing deep love for both of them, creating a new family in that harrowing moment. Jesus loved his friends and loved them to the end. And he met that end, that terrible end, because he loved God more. He was so radically allegiant to the love of God that this lazy and brutal world turned on him. He showed no hate, only love. And on the other side of death, Jesus did not bother to seek vengeance on his accusers. He gathered his followers not to berate them for their cowardice, but to share meals with them and to ask, "Do you love me more than these?" Do you see now what it means to love me more? This is what I came for: to love more than life itself, not to hate.

Jesus came to love us beyond life and to show us how to love more. Don't let anyone tell you different. Jesus will not be a cover story for hate, not for mine or yours or anyone's. This is the rub. We are called to love, to love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, and also strangers and enemies, the list goes on, and also still to love God yet more.