

Finding Ourselves and Finding God

6-22-08

Matthew 10:24-32

There's an advertisement on the radio that I just love. It's by an insurance agency and it starts out by describing a person who orders a cup of coffee saying something like: "I'd like a double shot, half caff, part soy, sugar free, add hazelnut, light caramel, extra hot, double cup, no foam, with whip tall latte." Then the announcer says "Too Long Coffee Orderer, you're one of us. And we're a lot like you – a little bit different." I think I'm drawn to it because I love the friendly spoof on coffee orderers in this coffee drinking part of the world, and because I love the part where it says, "you're one of us." This ad has elements that acknowledge an identity and affirm a sense of belonging – "you're one of us."

Who we are, and to whom we belong, are very significant in our lives. In fact, I would say that we spend most of our lives, via the experiences we have, learning and figuring out who we are. Even as some of us become more and more "set in our ways," still, I don't think we ever stop growing or changing and living into being someone different than we were a few experiences back. Who are we, and to whom do we belong?

Today's scripture challenges us to think in new ways about those questions. It's a difficult scripture; one that Barbara Brown Taylor calls a "burr from Matthew's Gospel – one of those passages she wishes he had never written down." Indeed, the words that Jesus utters, that he has come not to bring peace, but a

sword, and to set family member against family member, seem contrary to what we hold sacred and dear. Very difficult, also, are the words that we cannot love our parents or children more than Jesus, and still remain worthy of Jesus. Is this the same Jesus who assures us that God's love is so great for us that even the hairs on our head are counted? How can we be so loved, and at the same time, so challenged as to have to put aside family in order to return this love and loyalty?

Let's see what we can learn from this passage, because it is an opportunity for us to continue in our growth as disciples. It is a reading that leads us – or maybe pulls us along somewhat unwillingly, but still toward an understanding of the joy as well as the sacrifice of discipleship. For even when the path of discipleship is difficult, it leads us to abundant life.

One way of looking at Matthew's account, this is to understand that Jesus' call for our loyalty is set against a very high standard. If we look at it in terms of running hurdles at a track meet, the best runner will want to go for the jumping the highest hurdle, for it would mean very little to meet a goal of jumping only the lowest hurdle. If we look at it in terms of relationships, which Jesus does, to love Jesus more than someone we don't particularly care for is easy. But what Jesus asks is that we love and follow him even more than the people we hold most dear.

By our faith, we acknowledge that as we follow Christ, Christ has a claim on us. And in pursuing that faith and the claim, we do learn more about who we are. So, who are you? I, for one, am a spouse who loves her husband deeply, and a

mother who loves her children fiercely. I am a disciple who loves and stands in awe of God, and I am a disciple who balks at the idea of Jesus calling me to love him over and seemingly against my family. So, now, let me go back to Barbara Brown Taylor's take on this passage. She says, "I am a daughter, a wife, a sister, an aunt, and each of these identities has shaped my life, BUT, she says, none of them contains me. I am Barbara. I am Christian. I am a child of God. That is my true identity, and all the others grow out of it...we are God's child first. And that is no role. That is who we most truly are." That is powerful!

Perhaps one of the most powerful ideas to be gleaned from this passage is that our daily lives and our faith lives are not two separate entities. We are not Christians part of the time and members of our families part of the time. It is all tied up together. Sometimes that may bring us into conflict with those in our homes or even in our congregations. We may not always understand or agree with one another. Faith may call us to stand apart from one another, even those close to us. And yet, as we grow into the understanding of being a child of God, of finding ourselves in this identity, we find God, and that opens the doors for our faith in God to grow in very powerful ways.

This morning we are celebrating lives growing in faith and service, as we ordain and install three of our members to the ministries of deacon and elder. When we ordain people, we are not setting them above anyone else, but rather

setting them aside for a particular service and ministry. I invite you to join in this service by joining in the litany that is printed in your bulletin.