

FAMILY VALUES

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
June 6, 2021**

Psalm 138
Mark 3:20-21, 30-35

As we heard in this morning's gospel lesson, the family into which Jesus was born did not approve of his zeal for the kingdom of God. They reckoned it overwrought, even fanatic. They questioned his sanity and came to take him home: "He has gone out of his mind," they said. So Jesus had to choose between the dear familiar music of home and the insistent beat of another drum. He made his choice: "Who are my mother and my brothers? [he asked.] Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." On the surface, there is something harsh about Jesus' response to his family's request to reach out to him. The image of Jesus seeming to turn his back on his own mother and siblings simply does not fit with our pious picture of him. What is going on here?

Let me say at the outset that I do not see this incident as the general attitude Jesus had toward family life. There is ample evidence of Jesus' love for his home. His parables are again and again drawn from the well-loved incidents of home, and his prayer "Our Father" draws humankind into one family. And, of course, in John's gospel, as he dies on the cross, he makes certain that care will be provided for his mother after his death.¹

Yet Jesus had to make his choice, as every person must, between his home town and the mysterious World beyond it. In that choice Jesus was very lonely: "The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head," we are told.² Modern psychology teaches us how we are all shaped and misshaped by our families of origin. Psychological maturation involves the formation of a personal and social identity for oneself. Growing up thus tends to take us beyond the home. So Jesus, never disparaging home, always grateful for it, always aware of its necessary importance, is psychologically appropriate in calling for his disciples to break with home. The breach comes naturally on the human level, giving us room to form new earthborn loyalties: families of our own, for example. But it must also come on a much deeper level, in obedience to a Voice from God's Spirit, the discovery of a moral purpose, a vocational call.

In this regard, no earthly loyalty can long content us. Some of you may see the white marble statue of a British nurse standing just above Trafalgar Square and beneath Leicester Square in London. It is the statue of Nurse Edith Cavell. One of her claims to fame is that in the early morning hours of October 12, 1915, she was tied to a stake in German-occupied Belgium and shot as a traitor for the "crime" of assisting soldiers in their flight to neutral Holland. Her last moments were described by an eyewitness: "After receiving the sacrament, and within minutes of being led out to her death, she said, 'Standing as I do in view of God and eternity, I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness toward anyone.'" On the base of her London statue are

¹ John 19:26-27.

² Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58.

carved the words, “Patriotism is not enough.”³

It is not nearly enough. Home is not enough, nor humanity, nor education, nor science, nor human freedom! Patriotism, if it is unexamined, may say, “Our country, right or wrong,” and thus become demonic. Humanity or humanism as a devotion leaves all unanswered the aching questions of our hidden origin and hidden destiny, and is confronted with humanity’s mixed good and tragic ill. The “American Way” as a goal, if it is not brought under judgment, becomes a cash register, a comfortable armchair, and a golf course. Every earthly loyalty, if it is made central, becomes idolatry: the worship of the disfigured part for the transcendent whole. All idolatries finally destroy their worshippers. So Jesus said of home, and by implication of all time-bound devotions, “Who are my mother and my brothers?...Whoever does the will of God...”

But what is to replace an unwavering commitment to family values? When we break with home, shall we ourselves become the new focus? It is plain that if a youth always obeys his or her parents, they become an echo; and it is equally plain that if they always disobey them, they become a converse echo. If you go into business because your parents want you to, you stultify yourself; if you go into business because they don’t want you to, you only add bitterness to the frustration. Then should you follow your own ideas and be yourself? You still have to ask, “Who am I? What is my true self?” Otherwise, you may end by being different for the sake of being different, in a Bohemian exhibitionism or a grotesque alienation—a momentary meteor burning itself out in an empty sky. One fact about “yourself,” anyone’s self, is that it is derived, contingent, creaturely; and that, therefore, the focus of life is beyond the self, even though also within it. “Thou hast made us for Thyself.”⁴

So how shall we define the new commitment? And how shall we justify the break with home? Jesus called it: “The will of God.” “Whoever does the will of God is my brother...” He knew that sometimes the will of God is hard to construe, and that at other times it is joyously or painfully clear. He knew that the will of God cannot be learned except in the long silences of prayer. For our clarity, conceding to our mortal need for an earthly sign, Christ offered himself—imperiously, yet in incredible lowliness—as living banner of the will of God: “He who loves father or mother more than me... He who loves son or daughter more than me...”⁵ Thus God made Jesus for us the incarnation of His will, the shrine of our devotion. Christ draws us to himself, and in loving him, we learn what it is to be a self. We find ourselves. We become whole persons.

Yet Jesus bound his followers to God beyond himself. “The word which you hear is not mine,” he said, “but the Father’s who sent me.”⁶ He knew our human need for a Sign in history, but carried us beyond history to One whom he called “Eternal Father.” There is an old novel⁷ that tells of a boy who haunted an ocean pier, not content with home and city streets. But why the dock when home is warm and dear, when streets have excitement and cash? One day the boy, fascinated, watched a ship sailing under sealed orders: it cleared the harbor not yet knowing where it was bound. Why should any boy or

³ Peter J. Gomes, “Patriotism is Not Enough,” *Sojourners*, January-February 2003.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*.

⁵ Matthew 10:37.

⁶ John 14:24.

⁷ William McFee, *Casuals of the Sea* (The Modern Library, 1st ed., 1931), 505, 512.

girl crave that unknown, the restless lanes of ocean with their storm and shipwreck, when they could sleep in a safe bed? But we do! Finite streets never content us: we crave the vast and unknown Infinite. The sea for us is Christ in God, the horizon of his words, the stormy venture of his cross; and the journey is under sealed orders, for no one knows the future; and our only sufficient comfort is his presence, which we can neither specify nor lose. His followers in every age have broken with home. They have had “nowhere to lay” their “head.”⁸

We shall miss the pathos and grandeur of this text unless we see in it both the homelessness and the new home of the early Church. “They of the Way” had forsaken both their own kin and their beloved synagogue. But they were not bereft. The Church was the new family. It was held in a love deeper than human love, in a bond stronger than any bond of flesh and time, its new devotion welded in the flame of accepted danger. Thus the words of our text are not alone the words of Christ, but also the direct confession of the Church a full generation after his death. We laugh at the church fashion by which members call one another “Sister Jones” or “Brother Brown.” If we remember how the fashion came, we shall not laugh: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister...”

So, we break with our earthly loyalties and form new commitments to eternal things. And then, miraculously, we recover that which we had renounced. In the new commitment our earthly loyalties are not lost, or they are lost only to be rediscovered in purer form. Home may once more provide a central instance. Suppose that a mother has been dominant or possessively indulgent and that the father has been aloof or absorbed in business, and that, therefore, the son in his growing years has known no real family love and no honoring of his freedom. Suppose, therefore, that he has renounced home, even though he visits within its walls, and that he has resolved not selfishly to “be himself,” but to sail the wide ocean under sealed orders. Does he then curse his home? No, he sees it in a clearer light. He is grateful for its blessings and understands its human failures. He has a gentle norm by which to judge it. He understands still more clearly when he has children of his own. Then he says: “There are no perfect parents. I in my turn shall both bless and harm my children.” That is why we must pray: “Our Father . . . forgive us our debts.” For every home needs the pardoning grace that Jesus came to offer, and every home is held and healed at last in an Eternal Home. Thus the son finds his home again, in a purer bond and with cleansed eyes.

Ask yourselves: Do not all earthly loyalties fester unless held in the astringent light of a Higher Loyalty? A musical comedy song runs, “We belong to a mutual admiration society,” sung by a mother and daughter. It has its place perhaps in that setting, but not in real life, for in real life two such people, living such a song, would go soft inside, like overripe fruit. Soon they would begin to sing, “We belong to a mutual *accusation* society.” Time-bound love is a stuffy house: not liveable until windows are opened on it from the Time-less.

The word is spoken also in a much wider context than home. For what child has the right to “be himself (or herself)” when every self is created and dependent and derived? The universe does not center in our mortal days. No earthly loyalty is vast or

⁸ Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58.

deep enough to claim our devotion, because, though we are mortal, we know we are mortal; because we have eternal longings. Tennyson put it beautifully:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.⁹

Our Loyalty is of earth, yet of the Sky. It is deep within us, but carries always beyond us. That Loyalty is our true home in an ever-present Galilee, and our only Fealty. But so gracious is that Home that, if we are committed to it, all our earthborn affections are welcomed—and redeemed.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

⁹ Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, Prologue, st. 5.