

The Invitation
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
September 4, 2016

Luke 14:25-33

Quick show of hands.... who here is prepared to turn your back on the people you love? No? Come on! Most of us have days when we'd like to get away from one family member or another! We may even have relationships that are strained, even painful – sometimes broken.

My mother's family, who mostly live in CT, used to be very close. She is one of 6 children, second generation Irish Catholic. Holidays were a big deal. As a child, I remember being among my cousins on Easter Sunday. My grandmother had a fun tradition of hiding eggs in her yard with coins taped to them. Imagine how many eggs she would hide so that all of her 21 grandchildren could find a few!

When my generation grew older and began having children of our own, getting together for holidays became less frequent. We were simply too numerous (and loud) to fit into anyone's home. This spring I sent out an invite to everyone in my extended family to come to my daughter's graduation party. I thought getting us all together would be a good way to boost camaraderie among my aunts and uncles and cousins and their kids. In the end, a very small number of them came, which made me sad. It felt like a missed opportunity on an otherwise happy day.

There's something in us that yearns for strong family ties. We want to look like those sweet families on the sitcoms that solve their major life problems in less than a half hour. We are parents and grandparents who fiercely love our children. We are deeply committed to our partners. We are children who protect and serve our parents through health and infirmity. We are loyal siblings. And those of us who have lost dear ones cherish their memory. Even if we find ourselves living a solo life in this moment, there is our friend group and our church, which often functions like a family, giving us the gift of love and hope.

That's why this teaching about hating our fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers is so difficult to understand, and very hard to hear.

Maybe part of that is lifting it out of context. Think of what comes right before it, The Parable of the Great Feast. In the story, a host sends out invitations to a party. His guests offer lame excuses for not attending, and the host becomes rather annoyed.

In the parable, the host had reason to be disgruntled – perhaps more than I had for my party. I hadn't bought the food and set the tables when we began receiving regrets. He had. Everything was ready, all that time and expense, gone to waste by those with last minute excuses.

The common thread is that for both his party and mine, guests didn't want to put aside what they had become absorbed in to attend a party that sounded like a great idea in theory but in reality felt more like an *obligation*.

In first century Palestine, obligations to your family defined you. As a father and husband, you not only had control over your household, but you had an obligation to care for everyone living in it. As a wife, you had an obligation to your husband, and your status could be raised or lowered simply by the number of children you bore. As a brother, you had an obligation to the family of your brother. Should he die, you were expected to marry his widow and provide for his children. Family ties dictated everything about your life.

So we can only imagine how heads must have turned, eyes popped and jaws dropped when Jesus uttered those lines about hating mother and father, sister and brother...

Maybe that was the point. Jesus was going for shock value, using the strongest language he could summon to get the attention of his audience.

"Have you been listening at all??"

Do you have any idea what you are getting into?

Have you even considered the cost? Following me is no picnic.

It will take everything you've got."

Jesus was talking about letting go.

Letting go of the things we possess — and the things that possess us.

Letting go of what can distract us from loving God with our whole heart and

soul and mind and strength.

Because holding on to anything too tightly is a form of idolatry — even when the thing I am holding onto is my son's hand or my grandmother's memory.

Anytime we confuse our power with God's power — as in, "*I have total control over this family, this career, this life – and I'm the ONLY ONE who can really take care of things.*" we stumble into idolatry, making ourselves a god.

Jesus had to use such strong language to get the attention of his audience because their lives and relationships, their family ties, left so little room for the Divine.

But, did he **mean** it, what he said about hating family? I think, yes... and no.

Yes: Jesus did insist, again and again, that to be a disciple we need to leave everything else behind;
leave your nets;
let the dead bury the dead;
sell your possessions;
follow me.

Let it go, he says. Let it all go.

At the same time, we worship a God who is not a tyrant, and we follow a Teacher who turned water into wine at a wedding, who welcomed children and who wept bitterly over the death of a beloved friend. The same one who said, "*I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.*" (John 10:10)

THAT'S the promise. Not that we shall be left heart-broken and alone;
not that we shall become penniless and be stripped of all we hold dear;
but that we will have abundant life.

The key to unlocking this troublesome text is to remember that this *isn't* a zero-sum game. We **don't** lose everything when we turn our lives over and follow Jesus. But we **do** learn that the gifts we have been given are all on loan.

So our children are not ours — to control, or to shape in our own image.
And the earth is not ours — to exploit, nor are its resources ours to consume wastefully.

And even our possessions are not ours – we may have worked hard to earn them, because at the end of our time we can't take them with us.

Our lives are NOT ours...

It **all** belongs to God – and *that's* the challenge:
to hand it all over, and then to receive them again;
to take them into our care and keeping and to love them **without** possessing them;
to love this earth and all its creatures,
and work for justice in the small place we call home;
and to love our parents, partners, children, siblings;
not because they belong to **us**, *but because they belong to God.*

*And **also**, to love our neighbor and the stranger — in equal measure, because we are ALL bound by the same family ties, regardless of the variations in our skin color or economic status or religion or political leanings or where we come from or who we love.*

That's the invitation: **Unconditional Love.** My siblings in Christ, I don't know about you, but I find that I'm not quite there yet (at least not all the time).

My world is still too small;
my heart forgets that it has the capacity to love beyond the perimeter of my own home and family;
my gut still suspects that it *is* a zero-sum game.
And I live with the fear that letting go might mean losing something precious. Maybe you do, too?

It takes time to learn to be a disciple, time and trust. So I'll keep working on it. I hope you will too. And may God grant us open hands, open hearts, and courage to give this work, this journey, this transformation everything we've got. AMEN.