

It's a strange juxtaposition today.

On the secular calendar it's Father's Day, a day when we give thanks for those who serve as fathers in this world.

And yet our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus says something that's jarring, especially in the context of Father's Day:

"I have come to set a man against his father... and one's foes will be members of one's own household. 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."¹

Happy Father's Day!?! Thanks a lot Jesus.

OK. What are we to make of this?

First off—Jesus often uses hyperbole, he often uses exaggeration to make a point. In fact, in Luke there's an even stronger statement along these lines. Jesus says there,

"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."²

Does Jesus mean this literally? That we should hate our closest family members? That we should hate God's gift of life?

No, it is hyperbole, a purposeful exaggeration to make a point. It's similar to when Jesus says something like,

"If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."

That's a deliberate exaggeration. You'd have to be crazy to cut off your hand with a hatchet in response to such a verse.

In fact, I met a lady who actually took this verse literally. She cut off her right hand with a hatchet in response to this statement. I met her when I was a volunteer chaplain at Texas' maximum-security mental hospital in Vernon.

We know it's an exaggeration, and that people in their right mind would never take such a statement literally.

So what are we to make with this business from our Gospel lesson? Should we not love our fathers? Should fathers not love their children? Or if we take the statement in Luke, do we need to hate our fathers and the rest of our family?

No—it's all hyperbole, it's all exaggeration. But Jesus is trying to make an important point: it's all about priorities.

¹ Mt 10:35-37

² Lk 14:26

Notice that Jesus says, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."

This is all about priorities. This is about what's ultimately the most important thing in your life. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not just one small piece of your identity. Jesus wants it to be THE most important piece. Jesus has to come first.

Your faith is not supposed to be just one of many characteristics about you. I shouldn't say,

"I'm a father. I'm a husband. I'm a son. I'm an American. I'm a Texan. I'm a member of the Rotary Club. I'm a Christian. I'm a Pittsburgh Steeler Fan. I'm a Texas Tech alumni."

That's exactly what Jesus is wanting us to avoid doing. Our Christian identity as disciples is not supposed to be just one defining characteristic amongst many. It is supposed to be THE defining characteristic.

Following Jesus is of primary importance—everything else is secondary.

That includes family.

That includes country.

That includes political party.

All of these things are important. But only God is of primary importance. We can pledge allegiance to the flag and the to the republic for which it stands. But such allegiance has to be secondary allegiance for Christians. God alone comes first. God alone deserves our ultimate allegiance.

And this might cause division within some families. That's what Jesus is saying this morning. Following Jesus as Lord, giving him your primary allegiance may cause division in your other relationships.

That's not as much of a danger in 21st century America. But it was a VERY real danger in the 1st century world that Jesus and Matthew are addressing. Because by Matthew's time, the original audience Matthew wrote his Gospel for would have found great comfort in hearing Jesus' words. Because a number of early followers of Jesus in the 1st century were kicked out of their families and disowned because they had become Christians.

So for them to hear Jesus words that loyalty to him transcends family bonds would have been of enormous comfort.

Plus, in a real sense the Christian church becomes a new family. As Jesus also says in our Gospel lesson, he will acknowledge all of his followers before his Father in heaven. They will be brothers and sisters in Christ with God as their Father. That too will transcend their earthly families.

So on Father's Day it's great to be thankful for your earthly fathers. But the more important relationship to be thankful for is the one with your heavenly Father.

And if, sadly, you have not had a good relationship with your earthly father, remember that God is the perfectly loving Father whose love for you transcends the love of the best earthly father on his best day.

So happy Father's Day to all of you fathers. But give thanks to God for his perfect Motherly and Fatherly love for all of us.