

Spiritual Detachment

Luke 14:25-33

Well, friends, it's Labor Day which, apart from its original intent, is more commonly viewed as the unofficial end to summer; however, in 2016 it also marks the beginning of the end of the presidential campaign! After a year of undignified delinquency from presidential wannabes, we are now on the final leg of the race. For that reason alone, we're not just celebrating Labor Day weekend, we're actually getting a head start on Thanksgiving!

Like many Americans, I've grown weary of presidential politics and the toxic environment we are subjected to in this country for choosing our president. The unfavorability poll numbers for both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are unprecedented and come long before Inauguration Day which, of course, is when Americans normally begin to despise their Presidents (we're getting an early start on that as well!). This year, the American electorate is no longer the envy of the world. No, we get to choose between one who may carry on the family legacy of impeachment and another who comes across as an odd mix of Saddam Hussein and Honey Boo-Boo!

Donald Trump, as a politician, has been an interesting phenomenon, to say the least. His campaign has defied conventional wisdom from day one. He is the consummate "un-candidate," which many enthusiastically embrace and, frankly, many don't. He's hard to figure out. He has made his campaign about saying what he wants while offending who he wants, while changing his mind when he wants and making us all wonder why he wants what he wants! His rhetoric at rallies or on Twitter knows no bounds other than to get the media to report every "I can't believe he said that!" remark that comes out of his unfiltered mind.

Now one might think that Donald Trump is a political aberration—an outlier, an anomaly. In many ways, he is. But I’ve come to realize his style actually reflects a time-tested and ancient form of public rhetoric, i.e., hyperbole—or overstating things (even in an outrageous or ridiculous way) in order to grab people’s attention. Hyperbole can be defined in this way:

A hyperbole is a literary [or rhetorical] device wherein the author uses specific words and phrases that exaggerate and overemphasize the basic crux of the statement in order to produce a grander, more noticeable effect. The purpose of hyperbole is to create a larger-than-life effect and overly stress a specific point. Such sentences usually convey an action or sentiment that is generally not practically/ realistically possible or plausible but helps emphasize an emotion.¹

What’s interesting is that literary critics and grammarians argue Americans typically overuse hyperbole in their employment of the English language. We do it by constantly appropriating superlatives to describe or promote something, in contrast to the British, who tend to be more understated in their use of descriptors. We hear it in our daily conversations and storytelling, sports commentary, online comments, marketing pitches, public speaking, and so many areas of communication. Against this backdrop, one could then argue that Trump’s rhetorical style of hype and exaggeration actually reflects a uniquely American cultural characteristic, which means, like him or not, Donald Trump speaks our language!

What might surprise (or even disturb) us is that Jesus of Nazareth did much the same, i.e., using hyperbole to get his message across. If we had heard him firsthand, we would immediately recognize this by the way crowds and critics responded to his statements, in contrast to tradition’s way of smoothing it over in Shakespearean prose in red-letter editions of the Bible. Many of the words ascribed to Jesus are intentional hyperboles—phrased in such a way to cause heads to turn and eyes to widen in order to

¹ “Hyperbole,” www.literary-devices.com.

bring attention to his underlying message. Taken literally, they come across as startling, even ridiculous, such as:

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away...

If you say “you fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire...

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the [realm] of God...

When you give to the needy, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...

Whoever wants to be great among you, must be your slave...

If you have faith and do not doubt...if you say to this mountain, “Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,” it will be done.

Those who want to save their life, must lose it.

Taken to the letter, many of these Jesus quotes come across as provocative, more than proverbial. Yes, there are those who are convinced that to be a true believer, you have to obey these words literally, which misses the effect of the hyperbole. One isn't supposed to take it literally—one is to respond to the underlying message, which is discerned through wisdom.

Such is the case with our lectionary passage today, which seems rather offensive at first blush: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Really? To be obedient to Jesus, one must hate their family? Doesn't this sound more like anti-Christ than Christ? If Jesus intended this to be taken literally, then the only ones who could qualify for discipleship would be self-hating misanthropes. So what's the underlying point?

One thing to note is, none of these verses in this section naturally follow what's come before it. It's like a string of non sequiturs. What Luke

has done, apparently, is bring together a number of independent sayings of Jesus—sayings that didn't originally relate or build upon each other, but somehow could contribute to the overarching theme, i.e., what are our ultimate spiritual attachments in life? What relationships and responsibilities do we prioritize above all others?

All of this then works to address one of the primary themes of the entire gospel, i.e., to assess the nature of Christian discipleship and what it requires in one's life. Namely, before you enlist, check to see if you can meet its demands, live up to its responsibilities and expectations, and follow its way and wisdom. Before you sign on the dotted line, be certain that it will be a full commitment and not merely a partial one—a fleeting inspiration forgotten over time.

In the early church, discipleship was a significant issue (as it still is today), especially as time wore on and the expectation that Jesus' imminent return began to fade away and these first and second generation congregations began to question the truth and value of their faith. In their early years, Christians began to evolve from being a Jewish messianic movement to a distinct way of life in the Roman world. Faithfulness to the Way was paramount, as the prophetic values and mission of Jesus expressed by his followers often stood in conflict with more conventional wisdom and practices of the imperial world, especially in regard to care for the poor and marginalized, hospitality to foreigners and strangers, sharing of possessions, egalitarian relationships, renunciation of violence, and so forth.

To make this contrast abundantly clear, Jesus' words were dramatized as an ultimate choice between loving one's family over and against a commitment to the Way (you must hate father and mother...).

This wasn't meant to be taken literally; it was for dramatic effect to provoke serious thinking about the choice to become a follower of Jesus. In the gospels we have stories of disciples who left their families, their employment, their way of life in order to respond faithfully to the call of Jesus. In effect, to follow Jesus was to embrace a new worldview and a new way of ordering life, and to do that in a new "family" consisting of those who shared in the mission's values and ideals, who helped carry the vision forward of God's coming reign—those who put into practice what Jesus taught. One can understand why there would be conflicting loyalties, especially when a new set of relationships based around faith can be quite different than one based on blood ties (some of us have had that experience as well). But in order to be a disciple, one had to make a deliberate choice, fully cognizant of the impact this commitment would have upon one's life and future. Jesus' words may sound extreme, but the net effect was, indeed, this was a costly choice to make.

A choice like this required significant spiritual detachment from that which gave purpose and meaning up to that point—a letting go of many of the things from which people gain their sense of identity, purpose, and value. This wasn't unique to Christianity. A sense of spiritual detachment lies in the heart of many of the world's great religions—spiritual detachment from the things that control, define, and rule the human soul—be it other people, possessions, power and privilege, popularity and prestige, even for some, poverty and pain. Most of what we humans attach our sense of purpose and personal happiness to don't have as much substance and value as we ascribe to them. They may have meaning in the moment or in the worldview we've always subscribed to, but outside of that, they are relatively inconsequential. It's no longer the "currency" you use;

hence, it's relatively meaningless, since you now have other priorities. They also are often fleeting, sometimes they can be harmful to us, and certainly they are too limited to provide for our ultimate destiny and wellbeing.

Yet, throughout the course of life, what happens? We desire and aspire to all sorts of things as if they have ultimate importance and value to us, forgetting that we are essentially spiritual beings who pass through a particular time in history on a human journey. From spirit we are born and to spirit we will return. Naked we come into the world and naked we will leave it. Everything else is "baggage."

In virtually every major world religion, the message is the same: we must find our ultimate value, purpose, meaning, and spiritual essence in that which is divine and eternal and then in relationship with the rest of the created order. Spiritual detachment occurs when we start to let go of the things that hinder our ability to be free with loving spirits. We let go of what is spiritually cumbersome and burdensome to us. It's cleaning out the closet of your soul!

As Christians, our path of discipleship and spiritual detachment involves reorienting ourselves and replacing all that controls us with that which frees us in spirit. So, instead of being driven by hatred, we choose to reorient ourselves toward forgiveness and love; instead of greed, we cultivate generosity, instead of self-serving ambition and pride, we are taught to express humility and service to others. These are deliberate choices we make; it's an ongoing process of disciplining our consciences, minds, and spirits to say No to some things and Yes to others. We do that when we replace malice with kindness, anger with gentleness, indifference with deliberate care, irritability with patience, antipathy with empathy, fear with trust. We discipline our spirits to value the richness of the divine and

human spirit, not the cumber we gather around us throughout our human journey. What can control us spiritually is given up in favor of that which empowers us forward in loving service with an “other-centered” life which is where we find our ultimate value and worth as human beings—as spiritual beings—and our calling as Christians. I firmly believe this is what makes for a genuine disciple—we discipline ourselves to become more like Christ.

I suppose this ought to be self-evident to those who claim to be Christian. But, looking across the landscape of our society and around the world and sensing the tenor of these times, for some, apparently, being Christian means something altogether different than what I’ve just described. For that reason, I also firmly believe that this kind of disciplined, other-centered life is particularly called for in these times. What we believe and what we do as followers of Jesus is not insignificant or marginal or irrelevant. People who can spiritually detach themselves from the angry pulse and aggressive greed of this world and bring a spirit of courageous generosity, mercy, and love will be used and led by God to help heal our broken world.

So, friends, I leave you with this challenge from Romans 12: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Cultivate your faith, discover your calling, and embrace your spiritual freedom inspired by Jesus’ spirit and message that continues to transform the world and redeem the human spirit.

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