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Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 4  
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 14:25-33

Could it be that Jesus was having a bad day? Given the whole fully human, fully divine thing, you have to figure that the human element would inevitably encounter anxieties and moods, stubbed toes and disappointments, clouds and seasonal affective disorder. Why else would he torture 2000 years of preachers, who upon reading his words in our text at the dawn of the week they will be preaching from it, find themselves channeling tennis' bad boy John McEnroe, "You can't be serious! You cannot be serious!"

"And he turned and said to them, "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." Hate father and mother? Wife and children? Brothers and sisters? Life itself? Excuse me? Is this Bizarro Jesus, saying and doing the exact opposite of our Jesus in some alternate reality? Because these admonitions seemingly run counter to everything that we know about Jesus, the mission, source, evidence, and testimony, everything.

Yo, Jesus, what about that 5th commandment? “Honor your father and mother.” Why would you tell me to love my enemies, and then turn right around and tell me to hate those who share my blood? If you tell me to do good to those who hate me, why would I think evil of those who love me? Was your servant John going rogue when he said, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen?” Or what about where John says, “God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them?” And wasn’t it you who said, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another?” I’m sorry, but I cannot see us putting up a sign out by the road saying, “Love your neighbor. Hate your Daddy.”

Hate your life? Are you kidding? Hate the most fundamental gift you breathed into us? Aren’t you the one who said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly?”

“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.” What is going on here? Because if we were to take this literally, it

would basically contradict everything we understand about God, about Jesus, about life. Consequently, there have been those through the centuries who've tried to soften it by saying that the word *hate* (miseo in the Greek) could be translated as *love less*. However, I'm not sure that's much help. So, why would Jesus suddenly turn to the crowds following him and suggest such a thing?

Jesus is on the road, traveling toward Jerusalem, and the crowds following after him are getting larger, (recall the image of that growing group of runners following after Forrest Gump as he runs back and forth across the continent). However, it would be a mistake to assume that since the crowds are walking together in the wake of Jesus that they are all at the same place on their faith journeys.

You could describe the crowds in Luke as rings in a concentric circle with Jesus at the center. The innermost ring is made up of the 12 apostles appointed by Jesus to bear forth his witness after the cross and resurrection. The second ring would be disciples who have been drawn to a place of faith and commitment. The next ring would those intrigued but not convinced, or those never being ones to miss out on an event, trend, or party, and they

have come out and are basically in a place of overhearing Jesus' instructions to his apostles and disciples. You could also possibly identify another ring made up of those skeptical or actively opposed to Jesus, his message, and his impact upon the crowds latching onto him.

Jesus' teaching here, however, is directed to those who have come to faith and embraced this gospel, but may not yet understand the distinction between grace and gratitude, acceptance and commitment, mercy and discipleship. Therefore, here, on their way to Jerusalem as the tensions surrounding Jesus begin to ramp up and the cross begins to loom larger, Jesus uses the tool of exaggeration to help his followers comprehend the meaning and cost of discipleship.

Think about what lies ahead for Jesus. The world around him is more and more acting against its own best interest. The prince of peace, the actual embodiment of love was in their midst, and yet polling would show that an increasing number of people, particularly those in positions of prominence and authority, were feeling threatened by Jesus. And a number of those were already actively seeking to mute or kill this Jesus who not only came in the name of God's love, but actually was the incarnation of

God's love. As it is stated in *A Declaration of Faith*, "In the presence of Jesus, who lived out what God wants us all to be, we were threatened beyond endurance ... Blinded by our rebellion ... we killed God's Son when we met him face to face."

So, you see, the cost of God's love for us is huge, incalculable - "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son;" "While we were yet sinners, Christ Jesus died for us..." Such love is given to us freely, whether we ask for it or not; whether we send a thank you note or not; whether we ignore it or embrace it, such love remains. It is given without litmus tests or preconditions.

However, any effort to embody such love is costly, because it threatens the equilibrium of a self-interested world. Self-giving love is often not received as the grace it is, but is viewed with suspicion, targeted for its vulnerabilities, exploited for profit, and often punished by those who feel threatened by what such love reveals about their own lack of love. To choose self-giving over self-interest, grace over grift, mercy over revenge, what is moral over what is profitable or expedient, to choose hope over cynicism: these priorities can set you against family, against friends, against

advancement, against culture, against popularity, against powers and principalities.

Love can put you in uncomfortable places. You know that. You've experienced that when the person you choose to love doesn't fit into the box of your family's expectations. A young woman is rejected by her parents because of the color of her fiancé's skin; because of her fiancé's gender; because of her fiancé's voting record.

Similarly, seeking to embody the grace given you in Christ will inevitably involve sacrifice, because saying yes to Christ means saying no to convenient hate, malevolent politics, structural injustice, insidious prejudice, winning at any cost, exploiting power, ignoring poverty, turning a blind eye to suffering, seeking revenge, or hoarding resources.

Movies highlighting the work of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, James Donovan, and Medgar Evers have shined a light on the courage, risk, and sacrifice of those who pursued the good instead of the expedient or profitable or secure. The film, *Bridge of Spies*, recounts the true story of attorney James Donovan, who having assisted in the adjudication of the Nuremberg Trials following WWII, was recruited by the government to

defend a Soviet Spy named Rudolf Abel. In service to his country and believing in the judicial right to a vigorous defense, Donovan nobly embodied that principle despite loud and cruel public outcry against him and his family. He was upholding the ideals of the country he loved but was being called a traitor. His work eventually resulted in the historic prisoner exchange that brought home two Americans held prisoner in the Soviet Union, one of those being the U2 pilot, Francis Gary Powers.

We live in a time when shamelessness is being treated as a superpower. When truth is inconvenient, when the right thing to do puts one at risk, just ignore the truth, conveniently avoid the right thing to do. Lie with confidence. I remember moderating a meeting once where a program director was reporting on all the wonderful things her program was doing, none of which was true. I knew it wasn't true, because I had been in the classroom and my kid was in the program.

I was speechless because she lied with such confidence, even knowing that I was sitting there fully aware that what she was telling them had no basis in reality. That didn't seem to slow her down a bit. It was an impressive performance. She was obviously a graduate of the George

Costanza School of Philosophy - "Jerry, remember, it's not a lie if you believe it." What truly amazes me is that she's not currently on the campaign trail or at least hosting a primetime news show. There are far too few folks willing to say, "This is wrong, and I will not participate in it."

Medgar Evers was diligent and unwavering in his selfless pursuit of rights for black people in Mississippi. He knew the risks to him and his family in the deep south. On June 12th, 1963, just a few hours after JFK's Civil Rights speech, Evers arrived home and got out of his car, carrying t-shirts screen printed with the saying *Jim Crow Must Go*. There in his driveway, he was shot by a member of the White Citizen's Council named Byron De La Beckwith. As an additional indignity, the hospital initially refused to admit him, and when they finally did, he became the first black man admitted to a white hospital in Mississippi. Medgar Evers died within the hour.

Two all-white juries refused to convict Beckwith, but Ever's wife Myrlie refused to give up the pursuit of what is right, good, and just, and 30 years later Beckwith would finally go to prison.

Medgar Evers didn't hate his family. He didn't hate his life. But he understood that he could not love his family if he did not first pursue what is right and just, that which is most clearly manifested through the self-giving love revealed in Christ.

The love of God is a gift to us, embodied in Jesus, revealed in self-giving. To embody such love, to reflect such grace is costly, requiring you to swim against the tide of self-interest, power, and the spoils of greed. Hate mother and father, wife and children, life? Well, perhaps it is so that the embodiment of love that is Jesus Christ can actually show you how you may truly love them. Amen.