

CHRIST THE KING LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

*Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Saint Luke 12:32-40
(Saint Matthew 20:24-28)*

In nomine Jesu!

It's Rally Day! A day to look ahead to our new program year with wonder, excitement, and joy! Deacon Ben's Rally Day blurb uses words like "celebrate, recognize, orient, encourage." There will be food – Breakfast Tacos! Pictures will be taken! Today is a day to celebrate every age group and every person in the whole Christ the King Church family! Given that context for our worship and life together today, it's not very helpful to hear Jesus say, "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself" and call that "the Gospel of the Lord." Some explanation is needed.

So let me begin by saying to any of us who have parents and/or siblings (and I assume that's all of us): Do not hate them! Even if they take away your I-phone! Even if they "borrow" your toys or clothes! Even if they're "annoying" you! Even if they make you go to church! In today's Gospel, Jesus is speaking in hyperbole – exaggeration! Speaking about the people in our lives who can damage our faith and diminish our willingness to follow the way of Jesus who reminds us over and over and over again that our God, the One Jesus calls "abba," loves us unconditionally, without exception; the One who, as we pray on Ash Wednesday, "hates nothing" God "has made and forgives.." In the Gospel, Jesus is encouraging us to ground every relationship, particularly our closest relationship the same way God grounds every relationship God has with us: on forgiveness, and one unconditional love.

In today's other readings, we can see that Jesus is not teaching this alone. In the first reading, Moses is teaching this when he asks those who followed him from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to a land of Promise, to "choose life." In our second reading, the Apostle Paul is teaching this when he asks slave owner Philemon to see his runaway, now returning slave Onesimus, no longer as a slave to be punished and kept in his place, but as "a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord." For children of God, love in the basis of all relationships and forgiveness, not obedience, not punishment is Christ's way of life. Moses, Jesus, and Paul agree, and they are absolutely clear: Any relationship that is not lived out in this way is a toxic relationship and its that toxicity that Jesus hyperbolically calls us to avoid. So does Moses. So does Paul. Back in the day when I was trying to make this understandable to confirmation students – and their parents – I explained this as "up and down religion." It works on human relationships just as well as it does on our relationship with God. Here's how it goes.

First, our relationship with God. If anyone tells you that there's something you must do to get up to God, to earn God's love, to get God's gifts, that's "up religion; "if...then religion." It's not Christianity, and for those of us who like to think more broadly, it's not a tenet of any Abrahamic tradition. God comes, unbidden, undeserved, unrestrictedly to us. We do not need to get up to God. That's how God shows up in every biblical story from the Garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem coming down from on high. God coming to us is what we count on at every baptism, every communion, and every time we hear "your sins are forgiven." No ifs and or buts about it.

Our relationship with one another is fueled by God's gifts received in baptism, strengthened in communion, and reinforced in every sermon and every faith formation study. Jesus calls and equips us to avoid using "if...then" language with one another too. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us to avoid anyone – parent, sibling, teacher, pastor, deacon, *anyone* who uses that language with us because "if..then" language used in any relationship substitutes obedience, shame, punishment, and, as Moses puts it, "death" for forgiveness, grace, and love."

In his letter to Philemon, Paul gives us a master class in this as he warns Philemon not to behave toxically toward Onesimus, the runaway slave. Paul urges Philemon to lay aside the rule that runaway slaves are to be punished, and to not only forgive the slave, but free him and receive him as a sibling in Christ, as a "brother" to use Paul's Gospel-centered language.

Here at this font, here at this table, here in this community of faithful people doing faith-fueled things, there is no "if...then" in our relationships. For we bear in our lives and shape our every relationship on what we trace on our bodies, the cross, Christ's cross, ✝ in which God comes down in love to us, and we, relate in love to one another. No "ifs, ands, or buts about it." Amen.

Amandus J. Derr
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