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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 are we to make of this?

Here we are, 21st century believers, followers of Jesus who are pretty sure that, if we should be faulted, the problem is that don't love our families well enough. We are busy Americans: forwarding our careers, protecting our rights, satisfying our spiritual needs—in general, looking out for number one. We have been advised to do this and have an instinct for it, too.

When we come to church, we expect to be reminded that we need to save some time and show some love for numbers two through ten: father, mother, brothers, sisters and, of course, husbands, wives and children most of all.

That is a sermon I would be more than ready to deliver, because in my lifetime I have watched the social fabric supporting families disintegrate before my eyes. As a priest, I have implored husbands not to leave their wives for other women and, when they did, I have seen the damage done to wife and children. I've watched women do the leaving too, with the same result. In my opinion, strengthening families should come to the front as a moral imperative for the church and for American society.

But that would have to be a sermon for another day.

Today, our lesson is:

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.

Jesus sounds angry, almost crazy—yes?

Angry: maybe; crazy: no. Let's think a little on his situation and let that shed some light on what he may be up to.

By this point, Jesus is becoming famous. His audiences are getting larger and some are following him from town to town. The crowd is intrigued by his words, fascinated and sometimes shocked by his behavior and thrilled by his strange ability to heal. Their tenor has evolved from curious ("Who is this?") to hopeful ("Is he the One?") to aroused ("This is the One!").

In this situation, Jesus now stops abruptly, turns about-face, and delivers . . . this angry, crazy-sounding warning. Under present circumstances, it is actually a *fair warning* to these would-be followers of his: “If you are thinking about coming with me, think twice and know this: this decision is going to cost you dearly, starting with your family’s happiness and ending with your life and health.”

That was nothing other than the cold, hard truth.

Here is an analogy for fans of the television series *24*. (For the rest of you, bear with me.) Imagine counter-terrorism Agent Jack Bauer addressing a batch of fresh recruits to CTU. The recruits have completed training and now are wired and ready to save LA from nerve-gas attack, bio-weapons, suitcase nukes, or whatever else the Mexican drug lords, Russian mafia, or Al- Qaeda might cook up next. The recruits are excited to meet the legendary Agent Bauer. They want to *be* Jack Bauer.

Now, Jack stands and gives the recruits the counter-terrorism gospel:

“My wife was killed in Season 1. In Season 4, my daughter left me. In Season 6, my girlfriend was captured, tortured and won’t ever be the same—and my father tried to kill me. *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.*”

The point is, this kind of thing can happen in the service of *any* greater good.

And that’s my theory: Jesus isn’t preaching, he is simply telling it like it is. “If you come with me, your family probably won’t like it and they certainly will not understand. You may be killed, hurt, or thrown in prison. That is the truth and here’s the deal: *If you would come after me, take up your cross and follow me.*”

As the early history of the Christian church unfolded, at some time or another every part of that dire prophecy came true:

*Young John, who trimmed the flapping sail,
Alone on Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming nets,
Head-down was crucified.*

In this university town, this scenario invites an academic question. What forces are driving Jesus down this road toward crucifixion?

For historians, the central issues are: (1) How is Jesus interpreting the Scriptures? (2) How is he assessing Israel’s political and religious situation under Roman rule? And (3) How does he understand himself in relationship to God—in other words: just who does he think he is, and what does he believe God is calling him to do?

You will find different answers to those questions, depending on which historians you read. Here is what I think.

I think (1) that Jesus, knowing his Bible, saw himself in the “servant songs” in the latter chapters of Isaiah. In that light, he expected to suffer on Israel’s behalf and for the greater good.

“He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole.” [Isaiah 53:5]

I think (2) that Jesus, being politically astute, recognized that Rome, and certain religious leaders associated with the Temple, would regard him as a threat, and move to crush him. And I think (3) that Jesus was, as we might put it, a “mystic”—God spoke directly to his head and heart. I know people like that who sometimes receive accurate information through spiritual premonitions and I have no difficulty accepting that Jesus saw his death before it happened in Jerusalem.

So his biblical interpretation, political judgment and spiritual experience all pointed to the cross.

To what purpose?

Again, Isaiah:

“I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out . . . from prison those who sit in darkness.” [Isaiah 42: 5–7]

The “blind” and those who sit, imprisoned, in darkness, would be us.

Jesus gave up almost every valuable thing in life that we human beings normally hold dear, and in the end he died, for the love of a greater good—a pearl of such great price it held more value, he felt, than family, health, wealth, power, or any other value in the world.

We wonder: What could possibly be worth more than family, health, wealth, power or any other value in the world?

We use our imagination: What would be more valuable than a golden egg? The goose that lays one.

That would be God, of course, who is the source of every human value and its goal. But the more important truth, the revelation, is that this source and goal of everything, and everyone, we value, is also Jesus Christ.

The Bible has a hundred ways to say this. Here is one, from Paul:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation . . . all things have been created through him and for him . . . and in him all things hold together.’ [Col. 1: 15–19]

Through Christ, for Christ, all the values of this world have been created: “all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small.” In him, these values hold together. That includes mother, father, sister, brother, husbands, wives and children too.

All our loves and values die with Jesus in his crucifixion. And in his resurrection, they are born again.