

The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman

Proper 7, Year A: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39
June 25, 2017

The Rev. Danielle Thompson

About one year ago, my family and I arrived for our second summer at St. James, and I remember that the text for that Sunday—I think it was the first Sunday in July—was the story of Namaan, the Syrian military commander who was healed by the prophet Elisha. And I am thinking about Namaan today because of how he traveled: Namaan carried money, garments, people, horses with him, like those of us who bring to Cape Cod our pets, half our kitchen, and every book we planned on reading last year, but didn't ever get around to doing. Namaan's packing, and our packing, some years, is a complete 180 from what Jesus is recommending to his disciples *this* Sunday. Jesus is speaking to his students, who are ready to become teachers themselves, about many things, including that they ought to travel light. Take no money, Jesus says, no belts, no bags—and definitely no pots and pans, no cats, no New York Times bestsellers.

Jesus' set of teachings last week, this week, and for several weeks to come is called the Missionary Discourse, and in addition to Jesus' rules for "leave-no-trace" evangelizing, this discourse includes others we may recognize: stay in one place in each town; eat what is put in front of you; if you are not accepted, shake the dust off your feet. But we may also recognize some of the harder guidelines it includes, namely Jesus' sayings about family: "I have come to set a man against his father; and a daughter against her mother ... and one's foes will be members of one's 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."

These are tricky teachings in any situation, but they come at sharp angle for those of us, like my family, who are here on vacation, because vacation is *all about family*—about setting aside a portion of our busy lives, as well as our habits and routines, to regroup and reconstitute ourselves as a little unit. The same is true, for many people, of this Chapel: there are weddings, funerals, baptisms here every year because it is a meaningful place for *families*, for generations of Christians who have called St. James home. And if you worship in another congregation throughout the "off" season, I bet a similar pattern is at work there, too, because for a lot of people, Christianity itself is about family: family togetherness, family customs, rites of passage involving families, family values. The original tension that existed in our faith tradition between the model of itinerant missionary disciple and the model of a settled, Christian householder has shifted, over time, much in favor of the latter. For us, the church is supposed to bring families together, not tear them apart, and why, we wonder, would Jesus not want this for us?

Because the truth of the matter is that these days, *for tearing families apart*, there are plenty of things other than the church that we can rely on! A lot of profound anxiety is coming into relief in our world today, and among the concerns many people articulate is this idea that the family is a bedrock social institution, and that it is under attack. Not everyone uses this more political-feeling language, but many can agree that family life is both foundational and fragile. As children, our parents are our world. As parents, our children are the most important thing. Our own parents again loom large for us in their mature years, and in this and other ways, no matter

how far we roam, we are brought back inevitably to the duties and dependencies we experience toward one another in families. This pattern hasn't changed. What has changed is that, outside of times of celebration and times of need, many people feel less connected and less solid toward their families as they want to be. Our economy, our options, our *choices* make it so; and this situation makes *us* overall, as a whole people, *more* isolated, lonelier, and part of a thinner social fabric than *we* want to be. Again, we wonder, when reflecting on his sayings today, why would Jesus want this *for us*?

It certainly does not align with what we see happening in the Hebrew Bible, Jesus' own Scriptures, where God chose to bring humanity into being through a family—Adam and Eve, two committed partners and parents. Or where God chose to save humanity through a family when he called not just Noah but Noah's wife and sons and daughters in law to build an ark. Or when, graciously, for no practical reason at all, God chose to bless humanity, to pull all nations close, through a family. Like Jesus reaching out to his disciples in the earliest days of our faith, God called Abraham from his wanderings and asked him to follow; and in return for Abraham's fidelity, God promised him descendants, through whom all of the world would come to know Abraham's God.

But as is so often the case with families, things get complicated for Abraham and his clan. Abraham's wife, Sarah, could not conceive, and so she offered him a relationship with her servant, Hagar, who gave birth to a son named Ishmael. Then, in God's time, Sarah was blessed with a child called Isaac. It is these brothers' affection for one another—Isaac and Ishmael—that threatens Sarah so much today. Sarah sees how comfortably interwoven Hagar and Ishmael are in this family, and she is jealous. She is fearful. She leans back on her status in the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of this family, and exercises what power she has to undermine a more vulnerable person. Sarah commands Abraham, as his proper wife, to expel her servant Hagar, and the child, even though they will surely die, alone in a wilderness place without the support of a household. Sarah protects her own, and ultimately protects herself. Likewise, she shores up the family for its own sake, disregarding entirely its mission, and the fact that Abraham's descendants were meant for something larger than kinship alone.

And while Sarah's behavior seems mean-spirited to us; while Hagar and Ishmael's story is desperately sad; while Abraham's cooperation at every point along the way is entirely baffling ... none of it is beyond our recognition ... nor is it beyond our understanding. Because despite how much our families mean to us, and despite how much we, like Hagar, need support and care in an unsettled and unsettling world ... we all know that families can be this way. That families misuse power within themselves and among themselves; that in families both vulnerable people and strong people may be singled out for derision and abuse. That our families sometimes exile us; and just as often, our families hold us too close for reasons that are self-serving rather than self-giving. We all know that families can be self-perpetuating—that they can become ends in themselves, ceasing to be creative, generative, neglecting to move out into the world ... in other words, to be *missionary*: people that bless the nations because they make each other stronger. Instead, they invert blessing, turning God's grace and abundance in upon themselves to the diminishment of all.

Of course, it is not just families who do this—*any* group of people, any *thing* can do this: where we live; where we work; what we identify as our culture and what our place is, whom we associate with in that culture; whatever passion we have allowed to do its work on us can work us into this pattern. I’ve spent some time lately reading a book that one of my former parishioners wrote during a desert retreat, having just left a prestigious position as a high-level executive in a major Chicago advertising agency. Though the story is not in her book, she once told me about sitting in O’Hare airport one morning before dawn, rehearsing notes for the meeting she would lead in New York that day while minutes away, back in the city, her spouse was eating breakfast; her children were preparing for school and activities; her journal and books—her writer’s tools—were gathering dust in a closed-off study. Her extended family and friends were afterthoughts, while her boss, her deadlines, her advancements were forethoughts. She flew to New York every week, more than once a week sometimes, so nothing unusual was happening for her, except ... *that* morning ... she didn’t get on the plane. That morning, my friend walked back through security, got back in a cab, and rode back home, decisively. That morning, in a moment, something changed for her and, in words attributed to St. Augustine, which she would later quote in her book, my friend was able to receive this simple truth: “We become what we choose.”

And ironically, for us, what she chose was family. *Among other things*, that is. My friend chose to back out of, to repent, of the machine that had built up around her life—or as one theologian has said, “to forsake lesser loyalties and risk social death in hope of a new kind of life.” And it is she, and people like her, whom Jesus wants to encourage today. Jesus’ words are for faithful people who want to live fully into their calling while facing opposition, pressure, even threats, because of their commitments. For people who long to be given over to something larger than themselves and must strive to sustain that longing amid distractions and discouragements. So the question for us today is not so much, “Why does Jesus hate families?” but rather “Where am *I* feeling discouraged, opposed, blocked in living fully into his call?” Has a lesser loyalty claimed me? Do I fear or resist its death? And if so, where *do* I find *hope* to live a new kind of life? We find hope in the God who followed my friend into the airport to turn her toward her family. We find hope in the God who chases Hagar and Ishmael into the desert to make them into a family. We find hope in the God who created humanity *through* a family so that we might be family for one another. We find hope in God whom we call Parent because he knows the number of hairs on our head and will not let us fall.