

Strange Family Values

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

WWJD – “What Would Jesus Do.” The acronym that is donned on bracelets and t-shirts made at church camps to make us ponder the decisions we make – but can we really aspire to do what Jesus did?¹

In the Forward to his book *What Jesus Meant*,² Garry Wills provides an honest assessment of the “WWJD” meme that has for many years served Christians as their “go to” touchstone for how to live a Christian life.

Should a person say to his or her mother “Woman, what have I to do with you?” when she asks for a favor?

Should we encourage twelve-year-olds to speak to their parents rudely and dismissively as Jesus did to Mary and Joseph during the Temple episode?

Should we tell a person mourning the recent death of his or her father to “Let the dead bury their dead” in order to pursue more lofty goals (such as following us)?

Should we tell people that hating their parents, siblings, and children is a prerequisite for seeking after God?³

You get my point; Jesus would likely not have promoted traditional family values the way conservative Christians claim. When I searched the internet for images associated with Jesus’ words “I bring not peace but a sword”, I found a bizarre combination of old art pieces showing Jesus literally holding a sword and a modern image of Jesus holding a rifle. Yikes! Jesus has been misused and misquoted by Christianity throughout the centuries. We need to own that history. It wasn’t us, but our Christian tradition, has certainly caused harm in Jesus’ name.

So, what do we make of this perplexing quote we hear in the today’s Gospel?

Don’t think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth. I haven’t come to bring peace but a sword. I’ve come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. People’s enemies are members of their own households. ⁴

Bible scholarship tells us that when Jesus lived and taught, they were dangerous times; to follow Jesus was risky. It was risky to be a faithful Jew, or a follower of the new Jesus movement self identifying as “The Way”, grounded in Judaism.

¹ This line of thinking, thanks to Vance Morgan in the article, “Jesus Didn’t Care about Family Values”, March 11, 2021. <https://www.patheos.com>.

² *What Jesus Meant*, by Garry Wills. © 2007, Penguin Random House

³ Ibid from the Forward, “Christ Not a Christian”

⁴ Matthew chapter 10, verses 34-36. *Common English Bible* (CEB). © 2011 by Common English Bible. Used with permission.

Matthew and the other Gospel storytellers told a particular story in slightly different ways, I'm guessing a slight exaggeration of whatever really happened as Jesus called the fisher folk:

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee... he saw two brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.⁵

Ok, so picture that poor father, dreaming of a succession plan for his boys who will take over the family fishing business, but, in the blink-of-an-eye, his sons jump out of the boat and follow Jesus, but we are not privy to Zebedee's reaction. I don't imagine he was happy, though.

Let's consider some modern-day examples of how, perhaps, following Jesus has not always brought peace to family dynamics:

- A woman in one congregation I served, felt safe within the community to reflect honestly on herself and her life, and she passionately chose to spend her time in church activities rather than at home where there was abuse.

She grew more confident in who she was, while she also had a transformative impact on the congregation. There was conflict for her both at home and in her church as she pushed for honesty and justice.

- Another situation I witnessed: Another family had a history of very traditional Christian values; the grandchild came out as gay.

A significant conflict developed between the mother, so proud of her child's courage, and the grandmother who never accepted the grandchild's identity.

To consider again those Gospel stories of Jesus calling the fishers – perhaps Zebedee's boys didn't just jump straight away out of the boat to follow Jesus.

At the heart of the call of our faith in modern times, there most definitely are moments of great conflict between our desire to get along with the circles of people around us, and, the values Jesus teaches and we live out. Think of your moments where you have faced a conflict, your sense of truth has put you at odds with someone you love, respect, maybe someone who has authority. Therein is the sword – where a value or teaching of Jesus or your Christian faith, if you take it seriously, will likely create conflict.

Diana Butler Bass, in her recent email newsletter, "The Cottage" (June 23) was preaching at First Baptist Church in Columbia, Missouri for their 200th Anniversary.⁶ Here is a small piece of what she said:

"Years ago, when I was a seminary, I loved both history, church history, and I really liked theology. But one of the things I noticed is that theologians always got in trouble. And I don't really like conflicts. ... and so I thought I'll become a historian.

⁵ Ibid chapter 4, verses 21-22. New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

⁶ This was the account of that sermon by Brian Kaylor, the editor of "A Public Witness"

And that way I can just sort of stand on the side of the fray and say, well, you know, back in the 18th century people used to xyz,” she said.

But today, Bass added, people aren’t fighting about theology.

“Now,” she continues, “we have all these historians who are in trouble all the time, especially on social media and people whose jobs are actually being threatened. This is the American context, so examples like limits placed on professors in Florida about what they can teach about the history of American Christianity – for example about Christians who found slavery acceptable.”

Jesus is not using truth as a weapon, but honesty can be painful, especially within families where we want to keep harmony, sometimes by ignoring the truth. He is inviting us to lead with honesty and courage rather than avoidance – I’m with Diana Butler Bass; I’m more comfortable with conflict avoidance.

I just finished reading “Son of a Trickster”⁷, a great book by Eden Robinson, that follows Jared, an Indigenous youth who finds some uncomfortable truths within his family as he claims his spiritual heritage. Growing up with alcoholism, he notices that as he begins dealing with his own alcoholism, he is shunned from his family.

If we seek to accept the invitation of Jesus to follow, we are invited to struggle honestly within ourselves about what we really believe, and often to let go of the unquestioned values within our intimate circles. The Good News, though, is that most of us are not expected to drop our normal lives in order to become nomads like this first followers of Jesus. It might mean, however, that we become transformative forces of love within our circles. Honesty and Love motivating us to lean into the conflicts, so that Christ’s peace (“peace” as Martin Luther King said, not being the absence of conflict) calling us as individuals and as community to be more honest, more courageous, more welcoming of diversity. Amen.

⁷ Son of a Trickster by Eden Robinson. © 2018 Penguin Random House