

Matt. 10:34-39

Family Values

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Metropolitan Community Church of New Haven
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Good morning! I'm Rev. Patrick Cheng, and it's a blessing to be here at MCC New Haven today. First things first. I'm not at the wrong service, in case you're wondering. I learned from Tom that there's a Korean-American congregation in this space too, but I'm MCC through and through. I've had the good fortune of preaching up and down the Northeast corridor, including MCC Boston, Hartford, New York, and D.C., and now I'm excited to be here for the first time. I'm also glad to help out Rev. Kristen this morning. I sort of feel like a substitute teacher this morning, so please be gentle with the spitballs. It's way too early for that kind of activity!

I thought you'd like to know a little bit about me. I live in New York City with my partner of almost fourteen years, Michael. Michael is a clergy spouse extraordinaire – he got up this morning at 5:30 (even before he could get his Starbucks coffee) so that we could be here with you. He's sitting right over there.

I have served on the staffs of MCC New York and Boston, and I currently help out Rev. Elder Diane Fisher with various regional ministries. Much of my day-to-day ministry involves working with LGBT Asian people around the world, including running a website and an international listserv. I am also a lawyer for another church denomination by day, and I sing with the New York City Gay Men's Chorus.

Although it's my first time at MCC New Haven, I am no stranger to the city. In fact, I've had almost twenty years of connections to New Haven. I first came here in 1986 as a prospective student to Yale. I ended up spending four years at Yale for college, and I have been back, on and off, for the last fifteen years. I've even been to the new IKEA and tasted the Swedish meatballs there. So I'm glad to finally be here with you.

Anyway, it's Father's Day today. Are there any fathers in the audience? Raise your hands if you're one. Congratulations. It is really amazing to me how we are everywhere, and how many fathers there are – both older and younger -- in the gay community. Michael and I were at the Fire Island Pines a few weeks ago for Memorial Day weekend, and we were amazed to see strollers and babies there, including running into one of our friends who is an adoptive father. And for the rest of us men, are there any "daddies" out there? We can't forget the leather community either! It is Folsom Street East today in New York City. Congratulations to you also.

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It's appropriate that today's lectionary reading is about families – fathers, mothers, and children. However, it's rather surprising in what it says. Jesus tells his disciples about what it means to follow him, and he says that it won't be easy. He says: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Yes, you heard that right. Jesus does not come to bring peace to the world, but conflict. He tells us that he's come to turn parents against children – men against fathers, daughters against mothers, and daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law. Indeed, he says "one's foes will be members of one's own household." Not only that, but Jesus warns us from loving our parents or children too much. "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."

Wow, not exactly your typical warm and fuzzy Hallmark Father's Day card, right? If you're shocked by today's gospel, you're not alone. It was intended to be shocking. In ancient Israel, the highest value was placed upon treating your parents right. The Fifth Commandment tells us to honor our fathers and mothers. In fact, cursing your parents was punishable by the death penalty under the Levitical code. Check it out in the Hebrew Scriptures – Leviticus 20:9: "All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them." And the passage in today's gospel about setting men against their fathers is actually a quote from the Book of Micah, who was an Ancient Israelite prophet who condemned his society from losing its family values.

So what is today's gospel all about? Why does Jesus turn the expectations of his audience – including us – completely upside down? What are we to make of Jesus' harsh message, particularly on Father's Day?

Well, today's reading is about the cost of discipleship. It's a reminder that it's not easy to be a follower of Jesus. The gospel is not an easy lifestyle to live. It's funny how many people on the religious right see the gospel simply as a book of "family values" that is compatible with middle class America – a house in suburbia, an SUV, a loving spouse, 2.5 children, and a pet. For them, being a good Christian equals attaining the American dream. Well, they're wrong. Or at least I don't think they've read Matthew chapter 10 very closely.

As Jesus tells us in today's gospel, following him is hard work. It divides biological families and households. It challenges alliances. Jesus tells us that "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." It's not about hanging onto lives, but rather giving things up. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Jesus'] sake will find it."

If you think about it, Jesus' sayings made a lot of sense in the early days of Christianity, when the Gospel according to Matthew was written. Christianity was originally a fringe community within the dominant Jewish religion. In fact, the earliest

debate within Christian theology – between Peter and Paul -- was whether you could be a Christian without also being an observant Jew (that is, keeping Kosher and getting circumcised). Paul and those who said “yes” won out, which contributed to the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. It also earned the eternal gratitude to those of us Christians who like shrimp and are not circumcised, but we won’t go there.

So, as you can imagine, telling the world who you were was tantamount to risking all of your friendships and family ties. However, this didn’t just happen two millennia ago. Does this sound familiar to anyone? It should, particularly in this community. This is exactly the experience of those of us who risk it all in order to come out to our biological families as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people? So many of us are divided today against our parents, our children, and our households when we come out and muster the courage to tell them who we truly are.

Even in 2005, there are kids who are kicked out of their homes, beaten up, and disowned by their parents for being gay. Last night, I sang with the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus for our 25th anniversary pride concert. One of the most moving moments was when the Youth Pride Chorus sang on stage. The Youth Pride Chorus was formed two years ago in connection with the New York City LGBT center to give young queer people a space to sing. Many of these young women and men have experienced first-hand the kind of alienation from their parents that Jesus talks about in today’s reading.

On the flip side, there are parents who risk everything – including their families, friends, jobs, and communities – for coming out. They sacrifice everything, and sometimes lose their children (literally or metaphorically) for telling them who they are. These parents have also borne the cross of coming out, and risked their lives for following the way of truth and honesty.

Many of us go on to form our own families that are very different than the biological ones in which we grew up or the ones that we raised. This can be very painful, particularly for those of us who come from communities of color, in which family and church ties are so important. As an Asian American person, I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area surrounded by my family and their Asian American coworkers and friends.

When I came out fifteen years ago, it was very painful for my family. My mother made me promise never to tell my father and grandmother. She was literally afraid that they would die of a heart attack! Things have come a long ways since then. Two nights ago, I was proud that my mom sat in the audience next to Michael at the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus concert. And I did come out to both my dad and grandma, and they – and my entire family – all survived.

Although I still love my biological family very much, my own “family” today consists of Michael, my friends in the Chorus, and other LGBT communities of which I am a part, some of which are primarily Asian American, but many others that are not. A true rainbow coalition, a vision of the kingdom of heaven.

Coming out is a painful process and, for many LGBT people, it is about following the gospel over one's parents, children, or other loved ones. Coming out is about being willing to take up the cross of truth and honesty, regardless of the consequences in a heterosexist society. And coming out is about dying to an old part of ourselves and being reborn into a new life. Only in losing the old life of the closet, secrets, and shame, can we find our true lives of openness, love, and pride. We, as LGBT folk, know first-hand what it's like to take up our crosses and to die to a false self so that we may truly live.

Thus, today's gospel affirms each of us who have experienced alienation from our fathers, mothers, children, and households, because of who we are. Jesus understands what it's like for us to form new families who, painfully, we may love more than our biological ones. He understands what it's like to take up our crosses of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender in families and cultures that are hostile to our very being. He knows that those of us who lose our lives of the closet will find our true lives in coming out.

On this Father's Day, we honor the men and the daddies who have served as our fathers and mentors, both biological and otherwise. But we also honor our heavenly Parent, the source of love and our being, who blessed us with the gift of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning. Jesus affirms that gift in today's gospel. Listen to the words again and how much it resonates with the experience of so many of us:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father . . . and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

May we continue to be blessed in conflict and in losing our life for Jesus' sake.

Amen.