

Sermon, Matthew 10:24-39
Seventh Avenue Presbyterian Church: June 25, 2017

“Are You a Love Dog?”

A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. Do not think 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 a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

A friend recently asked me what my favorite poem is. How do you choose just one favorite? Yet, this poem instantly came to mind. It's from the Sufi mystic Rumi:

One night a man was crying,
Allah! Allah!
His lips grew sweet with the praising,
until a cynic said,

“So! I have heard you
calling out, but have you ever
gotten any response?”

The man had no answer to that,
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.

He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick, green foliage.

“Why did you stop praising?”
“Because I’ve never heard anything back.”
“This longing
you express *is* the return message.”

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness that wants help
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.

Give your life
to be one of them.

Do you yearn for intimacy with the Holy? Are you a love dog? What are you willing to give up to be one? That’s what our text today asks. And it also provides an undesirable answer: You have to give up everything.

Recently a reporter from our local newspaper interviewed me about the rise of religious intolerance and also about my new position as Executive Director of the Marin Interfaith Council. The next day I went for an early morning walk. As I passed a neighbor’s driveway, I looked down and saw the newspaper. My face was on the front page. Yikes!

I knew the article was coming, but I didn't know it would be front-page news. I became anxious. I wondered which part of the interview was included. Did I say anything stupid that might come back to haunt me? And why did my face look so wrinkled in the picture? My mind was racing.

I breathed. I stood still. What was going on?

I hated to admit it, but it was ego. I wanted to look good. I wanted to project competence and goodness. My ego works hard to maintain its fabulous self-image and was ready to defend itself.

- What identity do you maintain and project?
- What's the self-image you are ready to defend?
- Are you willing to let that go in order to be one of God's love dogs?

In today's text, Jesus doesn't mince words:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

This isn't the nice Jesus who makes us feel warm and gooey. This is the badass Jesus who takes on the ego with ruthless, ninja precision. This is the Great Physician doing invasive surgery.

Jesus says these incendiary words to his disciples as he sends them out to proclaim the good news. He was preparing them for a chilly reception. Would they continue to yearn for God and howl that connection from the rooftops, or when resistance arose, would they fall into a confused sleep?

“Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worth of me.”

Today is Pride Sunday. We proclaim the truth of who we are and who we love. We shout from the rooftops our yearnings and celebrate our diversity. We acknowledge the sacrifice of family approval, careers, and even physical safety for the sake of authenticity. For so many, our families of origin and our church families, taught us shame. We were told that our yearnings for God and our yearnings for human intimacy were incompatible. Our lips grew sweet with praising God and life, yet we were told to be silent.

Today we speak out. Whatever our sexual orientation or gender identity, we proclaim our yearnings for truth and intimacy. As we boldly inhabit our longing, we find the One who is longing for us. Are we willing to give up everything for the sake of that sacred longing?

My friend Nancy McCranie is a Presbyterian minister in Texas. Nancy is funny, smart, and a delight in countless ways. Yet, when it comes to officiating weddings, she doesn't mince words. When couples first come to her, Nancy says, "Let's get one things straight from the start. You have a choice to make. You can have a happy wedding, or you can have a perfect wedding, but you can't have both. Which do you choose?"

Jesus makes our choice just as stark. You can live for a façade or live for God. But you can't do both. You can marry ego or marry the Holy, but you can't do both. Being a wholehearted follower of Jesus requires just that: your whole heart. To make this crystal clear, Jesus talks about family:

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own 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.

Aren't we supposed to honor father and mother? Isn't family the most important thing? Do we honor family or not?

Ram Das says that the ultimate test of your enlightenment is to go home and spend a weekend with your parents. If it survives that test, it's probably real.

Our families are precious gifts to treasure and nurture, but they can also keep us stuck. As Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says:

What passes for morality or spirituality in the vast majority of people's lives is the way everybody they grew up with [and everyone around them] thinks. Some would call it conditioning or even imprinting. Without very real inner work, most folks never get beyond it...Jesus uses quite strong words to push us out of the family nest.

The call of the Gospel is to spread your wings and fly. It is radical, uncomfortable and non-negotiable. It is to become your fullest, truest Self. And here's the catch. If it really happens, it's going to seem like a death. Again Richard Rohr :

There is a necessary suffering that cannot be avoided which Jesus calls "losing our very life," or losing what I and others call the "false self". Your false self is your role, title, and personal image that is largely a creation of your own mind and attachments. It will and must die in exact correlation to how much you want the Real.

In our text, Jesus says it succinctly: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

As a follower of Jesus, you have a choice. You can save your life, or you can lose it, but you can't do both. You can have a nice, well-defended ego that makes everyone, especially your loved ones, happy.

Or you can take a deeper dive. You can let go of the approved image that others project onto you and that you work so hard to uphold. You can look at yourself in the mirror or on the front page of the newspaper, and simply stop defending your ego. What would happen if you no longer kept up appearances? What remains when you let go of everything?

Every morning, when we leave home, our dog, a Fox Terrier named Cowboy, whines and howls from the core of his sweet little heart. He loves cheese. And he loves pestering the cats. But more than anything, he yearns for his humans. He is a love dog.

What about you? Do you whine for God? Do you moan for connection with the Sacred?

Said another way, do you yearn for the truth of your own Being? Are you willing to drop everything in a wholehearted pursuit to find out who you really are? Are you willing to live the fullness of who you are, no matter how chilly the reception might be? Are you willing to take up a cross and suffer with others as they struggle for wholeness?

Can you simultaneously fight for justice and love your enemies? Might you even seek to understand the pain of those whose politics you find so repulsive? Are you willing to be demonized for the sake of love? Are you willing to lay down your so-called life in order to find a deeper Life?

That's the Jesus path. Surrendering everything: the comfort of approval, people-pleasing identities, cherished stories that keep you safe but small, the beliefs, self-image, God-images to which you are attached. Let it all go.

In the surrendered emptiness, you come home to your True Self, to the image of God that you are. Only then will everyone and everything find their place.

So howl for the Source of your deep longing and discover you already are what you've been yearning for.

This longing
you express *is* the return message.

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
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Amen.