

**Twenty-third Sunday, Ordinary Time**  
**Pastoral Reflection**  
**September 4, 2022**

I've always had a bit of a bone to pick with Christians who think Jesus was "pro-family". The opening of today's passage from Luke, "If anyone comes to me without hating their father and mother, their spouse and children, brothers and sisters, and even their own life, they cannot be my disciple." Not sure how a passage like this can be held up as an example of how important "family" is to Jesus or the early church. If anything, I think, it challenges the ways that we limit who our family is—who we extend our love and care to, with whom we identify, who belongs to us (and we to them), for whom we are responsible, and so on. I think the truth that Jesus gets at time and time again is that for those who would seek to be his disciples, nothing can be of greater importance than one's discipleship to Jesus. Including family.

The old Scriptural language around idolatry may be lost when heard through our modern-day ears, but idolatry is still perhaps the biggest challenge that we face as Christians—the supplanting of Jesus with idols of our own choosing. And family can be one of those idols. Family can be an obstacle to Jesus. Family can be worshipped or obeyed or honored more than we worship, obey or honor Jesus. The idea of family—especially the nuclear family or family as those with whom you have blood ties—as an unqualified good is simply non-biblical, non-Christian.

The place of family—and all the obligations that flow from it—doesn't need to be an obstacle of course. Sometimes our families are the very places where our discipleship to Jesus is encouraged and deepened. But the opposite can be true too. Families that encourage love and care within the family while downplaying or minimizing the love and care of those who are impoverished or oppressed that Jesus calls us to is actually anti-Jesus. Families that encourage us to make decisions about where we live or how we spend our money or what kind of career we choose based on personal security and financial success are undermining our discipleship to the Jesus who calls us to serve others; to spend our time with the sick, the imprisoned, the impoverished, those who are mourning; to give up everything to follow him; to love our enemies; and so on. When our families teach us to prioritize our needs or our family's needs over against the needs of others or often at the expense of others, there is nothing remotely Christian about that.

Family is a complicated reality for any of us who want to follow Jesus. In all honesty, family—especially traditional understandings of family—is a mixed bag for Jesus. So let's not confuse discipleship to Jesus with any of the political "pro-family" nonsense that disguises values which are actually contrary to the message of Jesus. And let's also not equate the honoring of our own families with being good disciples of Jesus either. Lastly, let's keep expanding out our definitions of who our family members are, just like Jesus does over and over again in our scriptures. Only when we realize that we are all truly family to one another can we practice an authentic discipleship to our brother Jesus, the one with whom we all share the same parent.

*Johnny Zokovitch*