

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC September 9, 2019
23rd Sunday of Year C Luke 14:25-33

In today's Gospel when Jesus talks about hating mother and father, brother and sister, He comes across as a kind of recruiter for the Hare Krishna movement or for Scientology. Of course, we see quite the opposite in His own life, when on the cross His final act was to entrust His mother into the care of John, the Beloved Disciple. So, what is Jesus up to when He speaks in such stark terms? It is very much like when He says on another occasion, "if your eye be a cause of sin, pluck it out; if your hand be a sin cut it off." There Jesus is not calling for self-mutilation, and here He is asking for commitment, for focus, for dedication. By such language Jesus is trying to capture our attention, and hopefully He does.

Jesus is not preaching Himself, He is announcing the coming of God's Kingdom; He is the Messiah, but does not possess what today we would call a Messiah-complex; He is not a cult-figure demanding blind loyalty, but wants His followers to be sure that they know what they, what we are signing up for. He is asking them/us to re-examine all our loyalties and allegiances, starting with the most basic, namely, the family and extending outward to all those other groups to which we are bound by blood, friendship, race, patriotism, religion, and so on. He is calling us to renounce our attachments to all our narrow, tribal loyalties for an allegiance to that which is broad enough to embrace all peoples—an allegiance to the kingdom of God.

The content of Jesus' preaching was not Himself, as we are sometimes inclined to believe, but the coming of God's kingdom. The Kingdom of God is not so much a thing, a place, an idea, but simply what happens when God is so present, so real and active in the lives of people, that they show towards one another that sort of love which is of God's own Self. The kingdom is seen most clearly in Jesus' ministry of compassionate love, and it is that to which the church points when, as a community of His disciples, we do today what Jesus did then, and proceed to break down the walls and barriers that separate people from each other and from God.

We remember the words of Jesus, "the Kingdom of God is within you," but too often we understand that as some personal, interior, spiritual possession. Actually Jesus means the Kingdom of God is found within the plural "you," in the spaces between people, in their, in our interactions with each other, when people act in a godly, in a loving way. That's where God is found. In this light God is discovered more as a verb than as a noun.

We live in a world, in a society, in which when interests are threatened, people are

very quick to “circle the wagons.” We know those who are with us and those who are against us. But it doesn't stop there. People, when they feel threatened, are quick to invent slurs and insults to demean and dehumanize those whom they feel are attacking them. The key moment comes when the members of a group believe that they are somehow victims—that the deck is stacked against them; that they are not being treated fairly. That's the critical moment, because “victims” often feel that they can make up their own rules. Their threatened status lets them decide what's right and what's wrong—“all's fair in love and war,” they say. It is the logic of the religious terrorist and the white supremacist. In the mind of the aggrieved mass-murderer, innocent people can be killed in a supposed righteous cause, because in their eyes there are no innocents. All incur guilt simply because they are “one of them,” one of the enemy. The interests of one's own group are made to reign supreme over everybody else.

We don't have to look to the newspaper headlines to see groups closed in upon themselves. If anyone has ever gone to a PTA meeting—whether in a private school, public school or parochial school—you may very well have seen one group of parents pitted against another, yelling all sorts of vicious remarks in defense of their “little ones.” Or with families, we've all seen parents who believe their children can do no wrong, parents whose permissiveness and blindness encourages their children to run wild bullying other kids. Some families can be so clannish that even when their children marry they can't let them go, so that those parents are constantly critical of the new in-laws, always interfering to “protect” their son or daughter. Today, we have the situation wherein sizeable majorities of both Democrats and Republicans would not want their children to marry someone of the opposite political party.

Over and over again the same pattern reveals itself—that tendency for groups, from the smallest to the largest, to close in upon themselves; to become a law unto themselves when they believe their interests are threatened; and to harm others, sometimes even themselves, in the “siege mentality” that prevents them from hearing the truth that would rescue them from their own paranoia. That is not to deny the disagreements and disputes will not exist between peoples, but that the ability to see just one's own side, one's own point of view, is the sure path to destruction.

Last weekend James Mathis, the former Secretary of Defense, commented in the WSJ about the polarization of American life. He remarked that what concerned him most as a military man was not our external adversaries, but our internal divisiveness. He went on, “We are dividing into hostile tribes cheering against each other, fueled by emotions and a mutual disdain that jeopardizes our future.” I would add that we have lost a sense of the “common good,” the sense that we are all in this together and that we have to work together. That is part of the inheritance of the Judaeo-Christian

tradition. Today our society is just running on the fumes of that tradition. We still use some of the words and phrases that are part of it, but the conviction, the effort to sustain it, the willingness to make sacrifices for it, has largely evaporated. We are running on empty. So, it behooves those of us who say we are committed to the common good to make our choices—cultural, political, economic—in light of it. We look back to our republic's roots in Athenian democracy, but that privilege was reserved for the elite. Most of the population were slaves and had no vote. Our secular society has forgotten that it is our religious heritage, which reminds us that every human being is created in the image of God, that provides our best hope for the future.

When Jesus asked His disciples to “turn their back on father, mother, wife, children, brother, sister,” it is not that there is anything basically wrong about these human attachments and relationships. It is when they become turned in upon themselves and not open to others, when the morality of the tribe comes to dominate to the exclusion of the needs of others, that is when these attachments and relationships are at odds with the goals Jesus was enunciating when He preached about the Kingdom of God. Let us pray that we can have the expansive vision of Jesus—that we may allow the values of the Kingdom be those that shape our lives—that we put aside our own narrow, tribal loyalties to be able to embrace all God's children as potential brothers and sisters.