

CALL ME AT MIDNIGHT

The Covenant Principle

Text: Matthew 26:36-46

Introduction to the Scripture

Whether our “family” is a group of close friends, a bunch of kids running around the house, or a husband and wife alone, I think it is fair to say that all of us want to “do life together” in the most healthy way possible. Isn’t this true? Most of us also recognize that this is not an easy vision to live into in our time. For dozen of reasons -- ranging from the pace of life to its phenomenal noise and clutter -- building and sustaining any kind of truly life-sharing community is getting harder and harder.

This is why God’s Word to us comes as such good news. Amidst all of the social and personal pressures which make true community difficult, God offers us some powerful principles which -- when put into practice -- can stil make our “families” enormously loving, creative, influential circles. These are the principles that we’re going to explore together in these weeks ahead. We begin this morning by looking together at perhaps the most foundational principle essential to growing a great family. Ironically, we find it at a moment in the life of Jesus when it looked like his family was breaking up, never to be rebuilt again.

Read with me, if you will, from **Matthew 26:36-46**. We’ll read responsively as together we proclaim the Word of God...

The Press of Midnight

In his phenomenal masterwork, *The Passion of the Christ*, filmmaker Mel Gibson pictures Jesus at the midnight of his life. About to be betrayed into the hands of men who will torture and crucify him, Jesus has gone to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and prepare. The name Gethsemane literally means “the olive press,” and it is poetically significant of the crushing pressure Christ now feels. Driven to the ground by the terrible weight of what he is soon to endure, the very soul of Jesus oozes out tears of anguish and prayer. The voice of Temptation presses mercilessly down upon him in the darkness, urging Jesus to give up his mission and spare himself the wasted pain of dying for stupid human beings.

Strained to the point of splitting, Jesus reaches out not once, not twice, but three separate times for the strength and comfort of the family he has brought with him to this place. In Matthew 11, Jesus had pointed to these same disciples and said “**Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.**”¹ Now at the midnight of his life, the clock of ultimate suffering is beginning its grim toll and Jesus calls out for his family’s help to steady him in the darkness.

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he says. **"Stay here and keep watch with me."** **"Watch and pray,"** with me for **"the spirit is willing, but the body is weak,"** he cries a second time. **"He left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing,"** the Bible declares. But each time, when Jesus returned, he found his family asleep.

When I was five years-old, my sister and I slept in a bunk bed, I on the top and she down below. I remember being shaken awake one night by the hand of my mom. "What's wrong?!" I said, suddenly wide awake to the blinding light and the sound of a screaming chaos filling the room. Only then did I realize what had happened. The floor of my upper bunk had collapsed, dropping me bed and all on top of my three year-old sister. She was crushed to near suffocation beneath it and had been calling out for help for who knows how long. But I had been asleep.

When Family Fails

"[Jesus] returned to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping?'" I shudder to think how often, even since I was five, the answer has been "Yes." It's hard to stay awake to the call of our family, isn't it? Whether our family is a group of close friends (as it was mainly with Jesus) or a house full of kids... Whether your family is the partner you're married to or the kin now scattered farther afield... it's not always easy to hear them cry. You can be well-intentioned. You can be just a pillow or a room or a phone call away. But if you're not truly awake... if you're lost in the slumber of your own schedule or system... if your lids are shut tight upon your own issues and questions... if you're fixed upon your own dreams and unmet desires... it's hard to hear the call that comes at midnight.

When my grandfather took his own life, he'd probably been crying out for a long time. His alcoholism was just one of the shouts. When my parents divorced, it was not without warning. When my own marriage or children have been in crisis, it has never been in complete silence. When a few of my closest comrades have fallen to life-wrecking temptation, there were foreshadowing signs we could have noticed. There are times, of course, when it is awfully hard to know that someone has reached that midnight hour. There are spouses and kids being abused, addictions spiraling up, health conditions spiraling down and it is difficult to tell. People have this stunning way of muffling their sobs. And all of this is why families sometimes fail us.

But most people, I think, long for something different. In 1990, Japanese businesswoman, Satsuki Ohiwa founded an unusual enterprise. Noticing that many elderly Japanese were increasingly isolated from their children by the frantic pace of contemporary life, Ohiwa set up a company through which a lonely person could actually "rent a family." For only \$1130, she said, we will arrange for a surrogate son, daughter, grandchild – whatever relative you want – to show up at your door and gush as if they haven't seen you in years. They'll share lunch with you, spend a few hours talking, handle an odd job or two if you like and then bid you the best of days. The idea

would be almost comical, if it weren't for the fact that thousands of people hired Ohiwa's service. When asked why she believed her business had taken off so, Satsuki said: "What is common about our clients is that they are thirsty for love." They had all reached some dark hour of their life, cried out in whatever ways they knew how to the people from whom they wanted love, then finally picked up the phone and called us.

The Midnight Call & Covenant

Who do you call at midnight? Whose name do you cry out when temptation or torment has you hard pressed? And who calls you? If a younger family member found themselves gay or lesbian, or dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, or departing expectations in some shocking way, do they know they could call on you and meet love? Does your spouse or friend know that if he or she was facing or falling to financial or moral collapse, you'd stand by them and work it through? If someone close to you was deeply depressed, or in trouble with the law, or dealing with addiction or abuse would you be among the first to whom they'd reach out?

Do your neighbors know they could pick up the phone and dial your number if they needed a place to stay or someone to dig them out after a storm? Does your child know that their fears and hurts and angers and failures matter to you more than your peace or programs? Does your spouse know that when you said "for better or for worse," you meant this, even when you believe you know better and he or she is at their worst? Do the people around you trust that they can call on you and find a love that won't sleep, at least not for long, when midnight comes?

Every great family, and especially the Christian family in its various forms, is founded on a hope and promise like this, and the Bible has a term for it: It's called the *covenant principle* or, as the late ethicist, Lewis Smedes, once wrote, *the practice of commitment*.² When I make a commitment to someone, "I make an appointment, sometime in his tomorrows... I stretch myself into a future neither of us can see, and plan a rendezvous there with him, and ask him to trust me to be there. I reach into the unpredictable times ahead and make one thing predictable; I will be there with [her]. I throw myself into the turbulent ocean of [her] uncertainties and create an island of certainty there for [her], the certainty of my caring presence..."

"Commitments are the only way for free persons to batten down their lives a little, give them some permanence, some stability in the midst of change—to keep them from being blown away by shifts in the breezes of mood and the blustery blows of passion. Commitments... put some muscle into our human relationships. [They] give them strength to tough out the hard times, ride out the stormy times. Commitment lifts life a niche beyond impulse, whim, desire, drive, lust, and all the other natural inclinations that make human relationships so rhapsodic and so painfully unstable."

The Source & Spirit of Commitment

It is frankly hard, of course, to live by the covenant principle in today's world. As sociologist Robert Bellah documents extensively in his book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, "individualism is winning out over commitment to other people in the struggle for the American soul... Our individualistic ethos has given birth to a therapeutic culture whose creed is every individual's right to psychic well-being. People relate to each other on the premise that every association is one [more] means for the individual to gain a bit more of the personal fulfillment that he or she has a right to have. In the individualist's life, a human relationship itself has no moral claims on the individuals who are in it; nobody has a duty to stick with a relationship he or she is stuck with if sticking does not pay off in private satisfaction."

Why should you honor your parents when they're no longer feeding your wants? Why keep investing in a rebellious child or remain loyal to a spouse or sibling who is not fulfilling your desires? Why keep investing in a friend or group member who is so fickle in their investment? Why answer the call of Christ, or anyone else, when the call he makes at midnight would disturb your well-deserved rest or comfortable sleep? Nothing in the ethical framework of contemporary life makes this approach to family or relationships a sensible commitment. Only one thing does: The God whose heart beats at the core of this Universe has practiced the covenant principle with us.

Again, Lew Smedes writes: "What we experience in our making and keeping of commitments is a reflection of God's style of creating and keeping his alliance with his human family. God has promised that He [will] be under us, that he [will] be over us, that He [will] be ahead of us and behind us, that He [will] be a circle of love around us and a spiritual power of hope inside of us. He promised that when we are losing control and are falling off the edge, He will be there to hold us up. He promised that when we are walking into a spiritual darkness and can't find our way, when we fear that we will fall and break our necks, when we fear that someone out there in the dark will assault us, He will be there with us and lead us through the darkness."³

I suppose "there is something to be said for commitment-keeping simply as a virtue, a solid building block in the edifice of character. It is a good thing to be a... loyal, stanch, devoted [person]... But I doubt," says Smedes, "that we are called to be commitment-keepers as a way of polishing our virtue... Commitment-keeping is not an end. It is a means. Commitments are good because life would be less good without them. Commitments are good because they create islands of security for people in their oceans of insecurity, enclaves of permanence in the jungles of change. Commitments are good because they serve [the cause of] human community better than does free-floating, unfettered, self-enhancing individualism."

But commitment is best because every time we practice it, it brings us into deeper communion with the God who makes and keeps his covenant with us disciples. It grows in us and in our families something of that greater love we see in Jesus who, even when his disciples were napping in his hour of need, nonetheless returned from the grave to say: "Come have breakfast with me in the morning... Walk with me through the day... Call me at midnight... and I'll be there." No wonder people follow him.

Questions to Ponder or Discuss

1. Who do you feel free to “call at midnight” when there is a great need in your life? Why?
2. When has someone called you and found you “sleeping?”
3. Why do you think making and keeping commitments is important?
4. Where do you see evidence of Jesus’/God’s covenant-keeping with people?
5. What is one commitment you find really challenging to keep these days?

¹ Matthew 12:49-50

² Lewis B. Smedes, *The Making & Keeping of Commitments*, The Stobb Lectures, Calvin College, 1986.

³ Lewis B. Smedes, *Standing On The Promises*.