

Matthew 10: 24-39

JESUS SAID TO THE TWELVE APOSTLES. "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 Beelzebub, 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 body and soul 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 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 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 his 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."

Good morning, and Happy Father's Day to all fathers, grandfathers, godfathers, and fatherly figures among us! I will say that, in places, some of the readings for this morning do not necessarily suggest the kind of loving relationship between father and son that we celebrate on Father's Day. But it's important for us as Jesus' present-day disciples to consider them.

In the first reading, we see Abraham essentially "kicking out" his son Ishmael, along with Ishmael's mother Hagar, from the household of Abraham and his wife Sarah. By our standards, this might not make Abraham seem like a candidate for the "Father-of-the-Year" award. Abraham loved his son Ishmael, who he'd had with Sarah's Egyptian slave Hagar. But Sarah did not care for either Hagar or Ishmael. In the passage, Sarah witnessed Ishmael "playing with" her son Isaac. In other translations, the phrase "playing with" that is used here is replaced with words like "mocking" or "scoffing". Ishmael would have been around 17 years old at this

point, while Isaac would have only been about two or so. Sarah didn't like the way Ishmael ridiculed Isaac; further, she wanted to make sure that Ishmael was out of the picture so that her son Isaac would be the sole heir to Abraham. So she told Abraham to cast them out of the household. Abraham really didn't want to do that - after all, Ishmael may not have been Sarah's son, but he certainly was Abraham's - and he struggled with it. But then God told Abraham not to worry, and do what Sarah wanted, and both Ishmael and Isaac would go on to prosper, although the everlasting covenant He'd made with Abraham would continue only through Isaac.

In this story, we may see a glimpse of something that Matthew's gospel addresses in this morning's third reading. In this passage, Jesus is talking with his disciples, and preparing them for the things about being his disciples that most people would consider unpleasant - things that we would naturally choose to avoid, if possible.

Jesus was preparing them for opposition and persecution. As followers of Jesus, we can expect opposition from the world. If the opposition to Jesus would mock, ridicule and mistreat Jesus, then they will do at least the same to those who follow and serve Jesus.

Jesus goes on to exhort them - and us - not to fear these things, because in the end, all will be revealed anyway. What is covered up and kept hidden will eventually come to light, and Jesus instructs us to speak and act in Jesus' name in the face of opposition without fear. "No matter what they do to you, those who speak what I have told you will one day be vindicated." Denying Jesus in the face of opposition results in Jesus' denial of them before God. There is no need to

fear opposition, because while they may kill your body, they can't touch your soul. We should rather fear God, because He can destroy both body *and* soul.

If these things aren't enough to cause the disciples to seriously consider the cost of their discipleship, Jesus immediately raises the discussion to a whole new level: the family. In 21st century America, while there may be a growing opposition to Christianity in general, we do not face the kind of severe persecution that many of our brothers and sisters in Christ face in parts of Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. But as Jesus warns, one area where we may more commonly find some level of opposition to our faith is from our own family members.

Jesus tells us that "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." This is hard for us to grasp. Of course there is no shortage of sources of conflict between any people, including people who are members of the same family. Still, our naturally strongest ties are usually with members of our own family. The love of a father or mother for son or daughter has to be one of the strongest loves there can be. Sons and daughters love, admire and respect parents for the love and nurturing they give, and for the sacrifices that they make. How can Jesus say that members of our own household will be our foes, and that our love for him must be greater than our love for them? Why is Jesus bringing a sword to create division and strife in the world, even within the very foundation of the nuclear family?

When we become true disciples of Jesus, we become more than just followers and servants. We become spiritually united with him -- *in* him. This morning's passage from Paul's letter to the

Romans touches upon this. By having been baptized into Christ, we have "taken the plunge" and are united with him in his death, and thus united with him in his resurrection. Paul says we are to consider ourselves dead to ourselves and our sin, and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Those who have not similarly undergone this spiritual baptism have not been united with Christ, and remain apart from him. That applies to anyone, whether it's someone persecuting Christians in Africa, a friendly face at work, or even a beloved member of our immediate family. There is always going to be that difference - that divide between those who are "in Christ" and those who are not, and while it may not manifest itself to us in open opposition, Jesus tells us that we need to be prepared that even a dearest family member may take offense or become hostile toward us because of our relationship with Jesus. And even our deepest love for them as family members cannot change that difference or bring about an end to division. If we deny Jesus in order to placate a member of our family, we are not worthy of him; if we deny him before men here on earth, Jesus will deny us before God in heaven. Jesus makes it as clear as he possibly can: following him is not going to be easy, even with members of our family.

Abraham, in a way, demonstrated the kind of faith and trust Jesus is talking about here. The name Abraham means "father of many nations", and it was God who gave him this name. Abraham had two sons. The first was Ishmael. As mentioned earlier, Ishmael was born by his wife Sarah's slave Hagar, because although God had promised Abraham an heir from his body, and descendants as numerous as the stars, Abraham and Sarah didn't believe God could give him a son through Sarah - because she hadn't been able to give him one - so they took it upon themselves to come up with a human solution: to give him a son through Hagar. The

second son was Isaac, who was promised by God and years later miraculously born to his 90-year-old wife Sarah. God told Abraham it was Isaac who would be the heir of His everlasting covenant, through whom kings - and eventually Jesus, the King of Kings - would eventually come.

In the fourth chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses the story of Hagar and Ishmael from the first reading to illustrate the division between the children born in bondage and the children born to the promise of God. Ishmael, the child born to Hagar the slave, scoffed at, mocked, ridiculed - persecuted - Isaac, the child born to Sarah as promised by God. Abraham loved his son Ishmael, but trusted God and sent him and Hagar away. Although God promised to Abraham that He would bless Ishmael and make him fruitful, it was Isaac, the son of the promise of God, who would inherit all the blessings that God had promised to Abraham.

In Christ, we are all Abraham's descendants through Isaac; in Christ, we have all been made children of God.

Amen.