

“Gains and Losses”
Genesis 21:8-21 **Matthew 10:24-39**

It was just a little over two weeks ago, on Friday 13, that television journalist Tim Russert, suddenly and unexpectedly, while he was at work preparing for that Sunday’s edition of “Meet the Press” had a massive heart attack and died. His loss was all the more severe because he was an increasingly unusual type of television journalist. He did not try to impress us by rhetoric that was demeaning to others. He did not attempt to gain popularity or increase his ratings by demagoguery that appealed to popular prejudices. He was an investigative journalist that did unspectacular things like doing his homework. He was always prepared and meticulous both in his fairness but also his rigor.

Two Sundays ago we watched a remembrance of his life and were impressed by the number of stories told of his encouragement and mentoring of others. His faith was very important to him. He was a devout Roman Catholic all of his life. He was known for a cheerful disposition that took his work seriously but always had time to enjoy life as well.

He had a knack for capturing momentous events with an apt simplicity. One newspaper columnist put it this way, “Even the most non-political person among us remembers his analysis of the contested 2000 election: “Florida, Florida, Florida.”¹ He had a well deserved reputation for enjoying his family. He had an especially close relationship with his wife, his son, and his father. He had written a book about his Dad titled “Big Russ, My Father.” One review described it this way, “This is a story of love, family love, religious love, love of sports, love of people and love of life.”² The newspaper columnist concluded her remembrance with this sentence, “You can almost hear him reminding the 99 percent what it is all about: “Family, Family, Family.”

That has the warm, nourishing, affirming ring of truth about it. The gospel lesson today seems to stand in almost stark contrast. When it is read literally and out of context it doesn’t sound pro family at all. In fact when we hear words like “I have come to set man against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law, one’s foes will be members of one’s own household” Jesus sounds almost anti-family. What gives here? What is going on? After all, we thought Jesus was all about peace and love and here he says, “Don’t think that I have come to bring peace. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” We can easily become even more confused when we look ahead to the 12th Chapter. There we read that Jesus’ mother and brothers come to see him. He not only keeps them waiting outside while he continues teaching the disciples, but when he is reminded that his family is waiting for him he points to his disciples and says, Here are my mother and brothers!”³

¹ Phyllis Zagano in “The Charlotte Observer”

² amazon.com

³ Matthew 12:46-50

Before we rush to judgment and based on these sound bites are quick to label Jesus as anti-family, perhaps we should take a deep breath, do our home work, look at the context and in an attitude of prayer and humility seek some insight here. Because I believe that Jesus is trying to wake up his disciples here to the real challenges of following him and the realities of being his disciples.

Nobody that I know of is fond of being made fun of or ridiculed, yet over and over in the gospels Jesus is laughed at. Jesus himself had a great sense of humor. I know that you were blessed by the ministry of Rev Jean Russo the last two weeks in our absence, and I believe that was the topic of one of her sermons, talking about how important it was to have a robust sense of humor as a disciple of Jesus Christ, but having a sense of humor is not quite the same thing as being laughed at. That takes its own special kind of strength.

It is a strength that Jesus had; it is a strength that Jesus says that we will need to be his disciples, to follow him. Notice here that disciples are people who have made a decision to follow Jesus and not only follow Jesus but to seek the power of the Holy Spirit to become like Jesus, to become little Christs, if you will. That is what it means to be a Christian, to be actively seeking to become like Jesus, and to be at one with God. That is the ultimate relationship for each one of God's children, but it is a relationship that must be calculated differently than any other relationship. It can only be calculated by what we are willing to surrender and what we are willing to lose for his sake. But this calculation that prizes what we lose not what we gain is claimed to be what is only ultimately real.

A couple weeks ago many of us went to see the movie based on the second of the Narnia Series written by C S Lewis. He said, "One of the reasons I believe Christianity is because it is a religion that you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone could have made up. It has just that queer twist about it that real things have."⁴

For one thing, do you notice that Jesus maximizes the challenges of following him. He speaks in extremes, but he does not overstate the rewards. The comparison he uses is to sparrows, the most common of birds. The other evening I heard a discussion on television about should the penny be eliminated from our currency because it is worth so little. Jesus says you can buy two of these birds for a penny, if one of them falls to the ground God YOUR Father is present with them. He doesn't say that sparrows will stop falling to the ground. Jesus doesn't promise us immunity from suffering or frustration or even tragic loss. He does promise us eternal, divine presence, and he asks us to not only have faith in this but also to have the confidence and the boldness to not be afraid to speak up about it.

⁴ from [Mere Christianity](#)

I think the difficult part for most of us is that what we are called to speak up about is our need of God, our dependence upon the grace of God for every breath we take. We are far more comfortable speaking up about how much my neighbor needs God or about how those “other” people need to get their lives straight. It is always ME that needs to be transformed. I found this quote in the front of a Study Bible. It said, “If we want the Bible to come alive for us we must be prepared to have our most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our associations called into question. We must read humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance.”⁵

I got a lesson in this in the first church I served up in Gadsden County in a little town called Greensboro. One Sunday evening at Bible Study we were studying Romans 6 which has this question, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” There was a small group there that evening. Most of them had lived their entire lives in that little farming community. I asked them, “I was just wondering, have any of you had to die in order to be a Christian?”

There was a long silence but finally the Lay Leader of the church, a man named Herman spoke up. He started testifying in a quiet voice. He said, “I was raised to treat all people decently, but I was also raised to believe that people should know their place, especially black people and white people. When segregation ended I thought that was a terrible thing, but I also thought that here in Gadsden County we could just pretend that none of that really made any difference and keep living our lives as we always had. But then I started dating my wife Eudene, and her mother had different ideas.”

Let me interject here that Eudene’s Mother was named Thelma and she was a United Methodist Church and Community Worker and in that little community she had organized a Senior Citizen’s Fellowship group that was completely integrated, every Tuesday a group of about twenty ladies got together had quilted together, shared stories and shared a meal. Pretty revolutionary stuff for Gadsden County. Herman continued, I thought I would die when people talked about that group. But I didn’t. I was reborn. Today my next door neighbor is black, and we do just fine. Something old had to die in me for something new to be born.”

What was born in Herman was a Jesus kind of compassion, a Jesus kind of love for others. Jesus is not anti family any more than Jesus is pro violence. When he says, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword” he is obviously NOT calling for or endorsing any kind of armed violence or warfare against others. What he is saying is that the radical message of the Gospel, of God’s amazing grace and compassion challenges every barrier we erect to protect ourselves. What he is saying when he says that “your foes will be members of your own family” he is saying that following Christ will require us to look beyond the interests of our own family in order to participate in God’s love for the world.

⁵ From the Introduction to the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*

In these days of media saturation being in touch with the needs of the world is at our fingertips. The reality that we have to deal with is that we are each powerless to fix all the needs of the world, but the temptation that we have to acknowledge is to be indifferent, to harden our hearts but to harden our hearts is to deny Christ. The Jewish writer Elie Wiesel put it this way. "The opposite of love is not hate; it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness; its indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy; it is indifference. And the opposite of life is not death; it just not caring.

So what are we to do to follow Christ? I heard a story of a teacher who had a student that was always complaining, and the teacher was getting tired of it so one morning he sent the student to get some salt. When the student returned the teacher told the unhappy young man to put a handful of salt in a glass of water and then to drink it. "How does it taste?" the teacher asked.

"Bitter" exclaimed the unhappy student.

The teacher chuckled and then asked the young man to take another handful of salt and put it in a lake. Teacher and student walked in silence to the shore of the nearby lake and after the student swirled the handful of salt into the water, the teacher told him, "Now take a drink from the lake." When the student had done so he asked, "Now how does it taste?"

"Fresh"

"Do you taste the salt?"

"No" said the young man.

At this, the master sat beside this serious young man who so reminded him of himself, and looked into his eyes, "The pain and frustration and anxieties of life are like pure salt; no more, no less. The amount of pain and suffering in life will always be there, but the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container in which we put the pain and suffering in.. So, when you are frustrated, the only thing you can do is to enlarge your sense of things – stop being a glass. Become a lake.

God's compassion has no beginning and no end. God's love animates the life of every family on earth because every family is a part of God's family. Family, Family, Family, whether you like it or not.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev Stephen G. Hoffman
 First United Methodist Church of Palmetto
 30 June 2008