

THE KINSHIP OF GOD
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September 4, 2016
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Luke 14:25-33

Once upon a time, large crowds were traveling with Jesus. He turned around and said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

Hate? Did we hear that right? Is Jesus—the one who urged us to love our enemies—now advocating hatred toward our families? Well, yes and no.

Look, says Jesus, if you want to walk with me and build the land that God has planned where love shines through you must count the cost. The way a king counts the cost before setting off for battle or the way a builder counts the cost before undertaking a project. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

I also imagine Jesus saying something like this: *I invite you to follow me. It's not an order or a command. It's an invitation. And it's OK if you can't at this time. But if you can you should at least know the cost.*

That's the gospel lesson for today. This morning we'll take it with us into the divisions that plague our nation and the world.

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I've been troubled by racial divisions in our nation most of my life. And I guess that's why it's almost always on my mind and often in my preaching.

My parents were deeply prejudiced but not in an ugly, nasty, mean-spirited racist sort of way. They were devout, born-again Christians and were genuinely kind to blacks and other minorities.

They were taught—my mother in rural Georgia and my father in the coalfields of western Pennsylvania—to look down on people of color and in my father's German Lutheran family's case to look down on Irish Catholics. What my parents learned they passed onto me.

In one way or another they told me that whites were superior. Whites were ordained by God to rule over people of color. Blacks were cursed by God to serve whites, I was told. My father even pointed to a verse in the Bible that said so.

My father learned it from preachers who learned it from their teachers who learned it from their teachers going back a hundred years or more. Later I found out that tens of millions of American Christians had been taught that horrific lie and believed it. Many still do.

I grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. Like most towns and cities in America at that time, Youngstown was strictly segregated by neighborhoods. But the schools were not. Every school I attended was integrated. I had many black friends.

In high school, I was the only white boy on the starting basketball team. My father gave rides to and from games to my black teammates. We'd pick them up and drop them off in their neighborhoods, several blocks removed from ours.

My father was happy to do it and always spoke kindly to them even though in private he would tell me each race must stick with their own kind. That's how God ordained it

from creation and, by the way, inter-racial marriage was an abomination unto the Lord, he said. And there was a Bible verse that said so.

First impressions are lasting impressions and hard to get over. It's one thing to change our minds and heart. It's something else to change our gut reactions. For me this is a deep impression, a wound that haunts me to this day. I hope most of you were spared such warped and wicked indoctrination.

For centuries, most whites in America were weaned on attitudes of white superiority and supremacy. That attitude was imbedded in laws like Jim Crow and in institutions like banking and education. That ideology enabled the dominant majority to profess innocence despite stealing land from Native Americans and stealing the labor of millions of Africans.

Nothing galls me more than to hear a white person say: *If I made it on my own, anybody can.* That's a delusion on both counts.

Most of us got over personal racism long ago and that's a good thing. What many of us don't know or understand is that institutional racism now does the dirty work.

Racism is still imbedded in the criminal justice system, the war on drugs, in schools, in housing, and the job market. But many whites just can't see it. As was once said of German Christians, while they went about their business, went to work, and sang the Gregorian chant in church, the trains rolled on and on.

Not much will change in our nation until white people become aware of inherent privilege and institutional racism. We can't turn them back. But we can turn them around. If our hearts are willing and humble, we can learn to see what for so long has been invisible.

Education helps a lot.

Education can lead to awareness. Awareness can lead to repentance. And repentance can lead to wholesome changes on a personal and social level. And that will bring deep blessings to our nation.

All God's children gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days.

Through years and years of education, including reading many books and listening to black friends, I now know the way of Jesus is to welcome one and all to the table of life as equals—all beloved children of God—none more valued than another. It's what Jesus meant by the "kingdom of God" which I prefer to call "the kinship of God." The word "king" comes with an inherent social hierarchy that Jesus intended to subvert. Domination is the way of empires and patriarchy.

And that is not the way of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul, once a racist himself, finally got it.

When a runaway slave named Onesimus found his way into Paul's company, Paul embraced him and sent him back to his master Philemon with a strong message: *Philemon, this man is not your slave. He is your brother in Christ. For in Christ we are all one.*

And the same goes when it comes to men lording it over women, straights over gays, or humans lording it over the earth. Such lording over others, such domination is indeed an abomination.

And that brings us back to the gospel lesson.

If anyone wants to be my disciple, if anyone wants to learn and practice my way of treating all people as one family, then you must take up a cross and get ready to die in

one way or another. You're going to get nailed by the world. You may not be popular in your own family, tribe, class, club, or nation. If you want to walk this way and build the land that God has planned, you will have to virtually "hate" mother, father, siblings, tribe, clan and even your country in order to practice universal, unconditional love.

This is not "hate" as we commonly think of it. It's not hatred as *disdain* or *contempt*. Nor is it intended for those who easily hate parents, or siblings, or tribe or nation. This challenge—conveyed in hyperbolic language—is for those who love family and country too much, so possessively and blindly that they can't see or embrace a greater love.

It's about a distinction between two kinds of love. One that is possessive, clingy, needy, and narrow and one that is free, open, gracious, and wide.

To walk the way of Jesus, we will at times turn our back on much of what we've been taught in order to embrace the Beloved community, the kinship of God that includes family, tribe and nation but never to the exclusion of the other—no matter who or what the other may be.