

## HOW TO HATE YOUR FAMILY

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“Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children,  
brothers and sisters . . . cannot be my disciple.”

James Dobson doesn't talk about that text much.

A journalist once asked Duke moral theologian, Stanley Hauerwas,  
to explain “Christian family values.”

Hauerwas began his answer,

“First you have to understand that, as a Christian,  
I am against the family.”

Shocking answer. Hauerwas likes being shocking.

Maybe Jesus did too.

But the first Christians were refugees from their own families

For centuries, Christianity was regarded as a threat to pagan family values.

So we have to take this text seriously,

seriously enough to really understand it.

First we should know that the Aramaic word Jesus probably used,  
the word we have translated 3rd hand as “hate” was shazav.

Shazav didn't mean to feel animosity.

He isn't saying to get all worked up over what oppressive, unjust,  
embarrassing, or generally unpleasant people our families are.

He isn't telling us to audition for a spot on the Jerry Springer show.

Shazav means to abandon, to leave behind.

So what's that about?

The family has always been a kind of relational security blanket.

It's a web of connections between people who are more like each other  
than they are like other people.

The family is a circle of the familiar.

It's a natural comfort zone.

We may or may not be happy in this familiar circle.

We may or may not feel at ease with our relatives,  
but even if we are tense and miserable with them,  
it's a familiar tension and misery.

We know what to expect.

So, in that sense, it is a comfort zone.

The family is also a closed system of moral obligation.

Family defines the people to whom we owe duties of care,  
and the people who owe us corresponding duties.

Those outside the circle, we don't owe; and they don't owe us.

This isn't a bad thing. It's natural. It's the way of the world.

It's how society organizes people into manageable little groups.

When we are children, we probably need such little groups  
to grow up in.

But when we are adults, and ready to become disciples,  
Jesus calls us to move on to larger circles of concern,  
larger reaches of caring.  
This isn't the same thing as modern Americans  
abandoning their families in order to find themselves  
or seek true happiness.  
It's as different from that as day from night.

Let's look at St. Paul for example in today's lesson.  
Look at the family language he uses for people who are not  
his biological or social family.  
He calls Timothy his brother.  
If we translate the text properly, he calls Philemon his brother too;  
and he calls Philemon's wife, Apphia, his own sister.  
Paul is writing about Philemon's escaped slave, Onesimus,  
but look what Paul calls him:

"I am appealing . . . for my child Onesimus,  
whose father I have become . . ."

Paul asks his Philemon to emancipate his slave, Onesimus,  
to break the established familiar circle of duty,  
in order that Onesimus may return to him,

"No longer as a slave . . . (but as) a beloved brother."  
Christianity didn't reduce the love of one's family.  
It extended that love to the larger family of faith,  
a family that crossed natural boundaries,  
and might include anyone.

Flash forward 200 years.  
Vibia Perpetua, a 22-year-old aristocrat,  
was in a North African prison awaiting execution for her faith.  
Her aged father begged her to renounce Christ and save herself  
out of love for her family.  
He brought her baby son to the prison to persuade her to recant.  
Perpetua refused. Love of family would not make her deny her faith.  
So she went to die, but not alone.  
She went to die along with Felicitas and Revocatus, once her slaves,  
but she now called them her "sister and brother."

Flash forward another thousand years.  
Young Francesco Bernadone's vocation to rebuild the church  
set him at odds with his father, Pietro.  
In the presence of the bishop and all Assisi,  
Francis abandoned his merchant father,  
but claimed many others as his brothers and sisters.  
First he claimed his fellow laborers, the Franciscans,  
then the ladies who followed St. Clare,  
then the poor, the beggars, and the lepers,

then the animals.  
He called the wolf of Gubio, "Brother Wolf,"  
and eventually, he spoke of "Brother Son" and "Sister Moon,"  
of "Mother Earth," "Brother Fire," and finally even "Sister Death."

Paul, Perpetua, and Francis stepped beyond the circle of the familiar,  
abandoned the comfort zone of caring only for people like themselves,  
but not to escape from relationship and moral obligation.

Quite the contrary, they extended the reach of their compassion,  
made brothers and sisters of slaves, the poor and the outcast,  
and, in the case of Francis, the whole creation.

So where does this leave us as 21st Century Christians with families?  
Families are a good thing.  
They nurture us, teach us, and can be channels of grace.  
But the family is a natural circle of compassion and moral obligation.  
Jesus calls us to step beyond that natural circle  
into a larger circle, a circle defined by grace not nature,  
calls us to love everyone whom Christ loves.

Jesus' words call into question the James Dobson cult of the family.  
In fact too much Focus on the Family is too much pressure  
on the family.  
Our families might actually fare better  
if we spread our concern for others a little wider in the world.

So Jesus isn't calling us to abandon the people we love.  
He doesn't mean we should love them less.  
He does mean we shouldn't hold our love inside the circle.  
Some of you may remember a particularly pathological pop song  
of the 1970's by Helen Reddy.  
The mother is singing to her little son "You and me against the world."  
Not healthy. Not good.  
"You and me for the world" would be a whole lot better.

The call here isn't to get divorced or desert our children.  
The call is to care about people outside the family  
as if they were inside the family.  
Last week's lesson invited us to philoxenox,  
sometimes translated "befriend the alien."  
One could paraphrase it "make the alien your brother."

The call is to extend our concern to people  
of different races, different religions, different political parties,  
different sexual orientations.  
The call is to follow Christ wherever his love leads,  
and it leads outside our comfort zone,  
beyond the circle of the familiar.

So who is it that is outside your comfort zone?  
Who is the alien to you?  
Is it someone of a different race or different social class,  
    someone with AIDS or Alzheimer's or mental illness?  
Is it a Moslem or a Jew or a conservative Pentecostal?

For St. Francis it was lepers.  
He had a pathological fear of lepers.  
One day he met a leper on the road.  
This time he didn't turn away but kissed him.

That's when he met Jesus.  
If we are looking for Jesus, if we would be his disciples,  
    we'll find him waiting for us, just outside our comfort zone.

*Amen*