

Growing up as the child of a Canadian Foreign Service Officer, I spent very little time in Canada. In fact prior to coming to Toronto in University I had only lived in Canada for two years when I lived in Ottawa for grade 1 and 2. We would travel back to Canada most summers, to visit my extended family, but as you can likely imagine I never became especially close with my extended family. Because of this my understanding of family has been from an early age focused on the nuclear family: my parents and my sisters. Not only was the nuclear family how I truly came to understand family, but my family was for all its warts and joys the only constant in my life of travelling from country to country for 17 years. Whenever I moved to a new country it meant that I had to make new friends, get used to a new school, a new culture and everything else that followed from that, but the one constant that remained was my family, the one place I could find comfort and solace and peace was my family. In hindsight I probably took that for granted more often than not, but my family truly was the place where I could find peace, the place where I could find refuge when I felt friendless or lost within the a new world of unknowns. My family was the place where I could routinely find joy as we shared laughs, my family was the place where I could feel at home, where I could be myself.

Over time this place of peace and joy has transferred to my own family: to my wife Bethany, my daughter Pippa and our newest addition our newborn daughter Felicity. For all the exhaustion and chaos that young children and particularly newborns can bring into a house, I would venture to guess that any parent here would agree that the joy of meeting your newborn child for the first time, or the joy of a toddler exploring and discovering the world around them for the first time is worth every bit of exhaustion and chaos that it brings. Perhaps peace isn't the word that everybody would use to describe having young children in their house, but for me there truly is a deep peace and an even deeper joy that I find when I am truly present with my family.

Coming from this place of deep joy and peace, I must admit I was caught off guard by the words we hear in this week's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, caught off guard by what Jesus says to his disciples about family. I was caught off guard and confronted by the seemingly difficult and harsh words of Jesus when he says to his disciples: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, 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..."

On the surface these are harsh words from Jesus, on the surface it doesn't appear that Jesus is being particularly positive about the role families will play in a disciple's life, and these words were especially hard for me to hear and grapple with as I revelled in the birth of my daughter, this week. While these were particularly hard words for me to hear, I would bet that these are harsh words no matter what your experience of family: they are hard words to hear whether you love your family or you can't stand them, they are hard words to hear because we live in a world where the idea of family is sacred, even if our family is broken and imperfect. Even in a culture which has moved farther and farther away from a 'traditional' or nuclear understanding of a family, even in a culture where more and more families are broken and in pain we still believe that family is important, we still believe that family is an integral part of what it means to be human, we still believe that family can and should be a place of great joy and peace: and I think it is for these reasons and many more that it can be so difficult to grapple with and hear Jesus' words in our Gospel reading today.

We can try to sugar coat Jesus' words, we can try to say that Jesus didn't really mean what he said, or that he was speaking about a specific context that doesn't apply to us, but I think we would be lying to ourselves if we didn't tackle Jesus' words head-on. To be sure they find their place in a specific historical context and within the wider context of Jesus teaching his disciples what it means to follow him, but I would argue that they have as much value to us today as we continue to learn what it means to follow Jesus, as we continue our own journeys of discipleship. No matter how hard we try to spin or soften Jesus' words here they remain difficult and remain a challenge for us as we seek to follow him today.

Although it remains difficult to hear, Jesus is clearly saying that following him will cause division; that becoming a disciple will have repercussions on the relationships and ties closest to us. While Jesus is certainly saying that following him will cause division, I would argue that he is merely explaining a reality of what will

happen, not necessarily what should happen. Jesus is saying that following him will cause divisions in families because not everyone will agree with that decision, because not everyone in a family will choose to follow Him, thereby causing division. We may not experience the totality of this today, but it was a very real concern for early Christians who's safety, identity and livelihood was so intrinsically tied to their families that they would have faced persecution and other forms of suffering for choosing to follow Jesus; and there continues to be a very real threat of persecution within families for Christians in other parts of the world, particularly in regions where they are the religious minority. While we may not experience the full-force of the division that Jesus speaks of, I would wager that many of you have experiences in your own families where a sibling, a parent or a child has scoffed at your faith, has wondered why you still go to church on Sundays or why you still believe that Christian nonsense.

While the family divisions that Jesus says will happen if we follow him are hard to embrace, I think it is the next line of the passage which can be the most difficult and troubling for Christians today. Jesus says "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 cuts right to the heart of the family, this seems to place our love of God and our love of family on a scale that we must measure up to. These are the words which really struck me deep to the core as I celebrated the birth of my daughter, and I think would strike each of us as we think about the joyous and peace filled moments our families can bring us. Am I wrong to be overjoyed with the birth of my daughter? Am I wrong to be filled with love, peace and joy as I celebrate my family? Is Jesus just being like a petty lover who wants us to love Him more than our earthly families? Does believing in God, trusting in his son Jesus really mean that we can't love our families as well or as much, does it really mean that we must rank those we love on a hierarchy of needs?

The answer I would suggest is yes and no. The key to these lines is "whoever loves father or mother **more** than me". In a sense Jesus is saying that love of God must take precedence if we want to follow him faithfully, if we want to commit our lives in discipleship we must love God first and foremost. But I would argue that more is going on here than just a petty ranking of our love between God and our family, I think that Jesus is once again just laying out the reality of the situation. For us to truly love our families, for us to love them as we were intended to love them, we must first be loved by God. We must first experience God's love for us and respond in love to Him firsthand so that we might overflow and in turn share the love we receive with others, so that we might in turn truly come to love our families as God loves them, and as God loves us. We are only able to love our families, we are only able to love at all because as it says in the First Letter of John "we love because God first loved us" and that "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters." Our love for our families is rooted in God's love for us and for our love of God, this is the reason that we must love God "more" than our families because without experiencing the love of God and loving God in return we are incapable of truly loving anyone let alone our family.

But how do we experience the love of God? And how do we love God in return? The answer is in following Jesus, the answer is in learning what it means to be a child of God, in learning what it means to be loved by God and to love God from Jesus: the one who loves God and us most fully. I think that the primary place we can learn what it means to be loved by God is in prayer, is in opening ourselves to abundant love of God in Christ as we pray with God, as we talk with God. As we are open to God's abundant love in prayer, we will begin to overflow with his love, and it is then that we can truly share the love, joy and peace with our families and with the world. I would invite each of us as we pray in this service, each of us as we go into our homes and pray this week to experience the love of God in prayer, to truly open yourselves up to be filled to the brim with God's love, to set aside the prayerful petitions and desires of your heart and for this week revel in the presence and love of God, revel and rejoice that God loves you for who you are, find peace in the knowledge that your own love for others is rooted not within yourself but within the deep well of God's love for you.

It is deeply comforting for me to know that as I come to know more and more the love of God, my love for my family will deepen. Even in the moments when we feel that we are too tired, or too irritated, when we are too angry or too sad, when we feel that it is not within our own power to love someone, it is comforting to know that it is ultimately not by our own power that we love someone, but rather it is because God first loves us, and that our love is rooted in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. My hope and prayer as you worship here today and as you go out into the world is that you might come to know more fully that you are loved by God, that you are loved by God

so abundantly and so fully that you can't help but share that love with your family and with anyone you meet.  
Thanks be to God.