The Bereaved Father

First Presbyterian Richland

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September 4, 2016

It has been my experience that about the age of 15 or 16 years of age many young men check their common sense and don’t come back to reclaim it until there mid-twenties. I have had personal experience of this. When I was 16 years old I had developed quite an attitude of independence. I thought I should be making my own decisions and doing what I wanted. This all came to a head one summer evening.

I came home from spending a day with some friends at the beach. I pulled into the driveway and was just getting out of the car when I saw my dad standing in the doorway. His first words were, “You were supposed to mow the lawn today.” Now I guess I had conveniently forgotten that, but rather than apologize, I decided to assert myself. “I’ll take care of it tomorrow.” I said.

Calmly my father said, “You’ve been saying that for a week.” Without really thinking, my common sense had been left in someone else’s care, I snapped back, “So big deal, I wanted to spend the day with my friends. The world’s not going to end if I don’t get the lawn mowed when you want me to.” My father just looked at me and said, “Well I guess I’ll have to ground you until the lawn is mowed. Get in the house and go to your bedroom.”

“Make me!” I said as I raised my fists. By now, with no common sense in sight and hormones raging, I was out of control. To show you how little common sense I was displaying, let me compare myself with my dad. I was 6 foot 2 inches tall, weighed about 200 pounds and athletic. My dad was 6 foot 6 inches and 300 pounds of muscle. I had seen him take a horse shoe in his hands and bend it out straight. I would never have landed a punch if I tried.

My dad just looked at me and then asked, “Are you going to hit me?” “I’ll do what I want, when I want.” I sputtered. It was then that my dad played his trump card, “Well, if that’s the way you feel, then I guess it’s time for you to move out of the house.” He looked at me for another minute and then turned to go back in the house.

But in that moment I saw tears forming in his eyes. All of my bluff and bluster collapsed. What had I done? This giant of a man, who had cared for me from birth with gentleness, kindness, and patience was crying because I had hurt him not with my fists, but with unthinking disrespect and rejection.

I don’t know how long I stood in the driveway; it seemed an eternity. Then I rushed into the house and with tears in my eyes took my father’s hand. I told him I would mow the lawn first thing in the morning. I told him how sorry I was and asked for his forgiveness. He swept me up in his arms and whispered in my ear, “I love you son.”

Wherever I had left my common sense, it came back to me that evening. I won’t tell you that my father and I never had any other disagreements, because we did. But they were never again like the one we had that night. I never again disrespected him and when he asked me to do something, I did it.

Our two texts for this Sunday are often difficult for people, especially for people in modern times. Jeremiah talks of God planning disaster for the people of Judah and Jerusalem. In Luke, Jesus speaks of hating one’s family, even hating life itself to be his disciple. These are words we don’t expect to hear from God.

We have come to think about God as a soft, cuddly God, spreading love everywhere, not as a God who can be angry and vengeful. This is especially true of how we think of Jesus; he walks through the world talking always about love. But here he is telling us that to be his disciples we need to hate those nearest to us.

As repugnant as these passages may be to us, we need to engage them, understand them, and take them to heart. Part of the problem with these passages is the difficulty of translating the Hebrew of Jeremiah and the Greek of Luke into English.

In Jeremiah verse 18:11, the NRSV has God saying, “Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.”

The Hebrew word which is translated as “evil” is “רָעָה” (rāʿâ), which has a number of meanings depending on context. A better translation of verse 18:11 would be, “Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your wicked way, and amend your ways and your doings.” Now even God planning disaster for someone may not be to your liking.

In our modern culture we have no experience of a sovereign, especially a sovereign with ultimate authority, but that is who our God is. God created all things including us and all things including us belong to God. God is gracious and cares for his people but in return he expects, even demands, certain behavior from us.

God had made of Israel a great nation He brought them out of slavery in Egypt and promised them the land of Canaan as their home forever. At Sinai God made a covenant with the people of Israel that he would be their God and watch over them; in return, the people of Israel would live by God’s commandments and be a holy nation.

The people of Israel agreed to this covenant, but over time they failed to live up to their part of the bargain. In the verses following those we heard today we hear that the people have said, “We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.” (Jeremiah 18:12)

God says, “But my people have forgotten me, burn offerings to a delusion; they have stumbled in their ways, in the ancient roads, and have gone into bypaths, not the highway, 16 making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever. All who pass by it are horrified and shake their heads.” (Jeremiah 18:15, 16)

God laments as a bereaved father whose children have disobeyed him and turned away from him. Much as I did with my father. But the children of God did much more than refuse to mow the lawn. They refused to live by God’s commandments of justice and righteousness. So bad were their actions that they had become a horror to all who saw them.

They were not the holy nation God expected them to be. So by his sovereign will he determined to break them down and rebuild them. He had determined to hand them to their enemies, that captivity might purify them. But even as God spoke the words of condemnation, he offered a reprieve if they would only “Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.” (Jeremiah, 18:11)

The all-powerful God was a heart-broken, bereaved father planning punishment for his children but offering love if only they would repent. And what was it that God wanted from them? “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

So is it so hard to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? Evidently it is. The people of Israel lived a generation in exile in Babylon, under the heel of the Babylonian conquerors, because they could not or would not repent of their wicked ways.

Five hundred years later Jesus was calling the people to repent and to do justice, love God and each other. But Jesus knew how hard it was to be a disciple and live in God’s way. The world has many ways of tempting us away from God’s way. We can be tempted by our own desires for comfort and wealth. We can be tempted to try and please others even at the expense of pleasing God.

Now, let’s clear up a problem with the Luke text. In Luke verse 14:26, the NRSV has Jesus saying, “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.”

The Greek word which is translated “hate” is “μισεῖ” (mesā), which also has a number of meanings depending on context. A better translation of verse 14:26 would be, “Whoever comes to me and does not have father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself take a back seat to discipleship, cannot be my disciple.” Now even the idea that family or even life should take a back seat may not be to your liking.

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God is not easy; in fact, it can be downright dangerous as Jesus found when he was led to the cross. That is why he tells us that discipleship requires us to place living in God’s way first in our lives. He is not telling us to hate our families. What he is telling us is that all else is secondary to serving God, even family if they draw us away from God.

God has given us the gift of life and the sure promise of life eternal. What can we give God in return? We can give him our discipleship of service to his great plan for history. God knows we are weak and that living in his way is not easy. That is why through Jesus he has forgiven our sins, past, present, and future.

Just as I grieved my father by disobedience and rejection, we all grieve our heavenly father by rejecting his way. Trust in God, examine your own life, and turn always to him who is just, righteous, and caring.