

Pentecost 3A June 21 2020
Matthew 10:24-39
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace to you and peace from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn*

*“a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
36 a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.’*

37 “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. Let's pray:

Seemingly unfair; some might say contradictory words from the lips of Jesus. However, today I'm going to talk about love triangles!

It may come as a surprise to you that I personally, yes, your pastor, have been involved in a love triangle for quite some time. Some might think it sacrilegious, scandalous, shameful. Are you surprised? Shocked? Yes, for many years I've been involved in an intimate relationship with my wife . . . wait for it . . . and the woman I married! Ha! I got you didn't I? Go on, admit it.

Now that I've got your attention, I think you know what I'm talking about. You've seen the pictures and headlines on the covers of trash magazines in the check-out lines wherever you buy your groceries. Love triangles are often the subject of movie plots and sometimes they lead to circumstances in which a crime is committed. But they're also a part of our lives. The question isn't whether we're in a love triangle. We are, probably several. The real question is one of priority, commitment, and loyalty.

In the classic love triangle, obviously there are three people. One is the object of affection of the other two. The two love interests compete with each other for the time, attention, energy, and love of the third person.

In today's gospel, Jesus nominates a couple of love triangles. "Whoever loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." In the first triangle there's Jesus, us, and our parents. In the second triangle there's Jesus, us, and our children. These are two of many love triangles that exist in our lives. Love triangles can involve anyone or anything.

Every love triangle confronts us with two questions. What is our most important relationship? Whom do we love the most?

After hearing Jesus' words it's not hard to figure out the right answer. The right answer is Jesus, but what is our lived reality?

I'd like to think that my lived answer is Jesus. I'd like to say with confidence that Jesus is my most important relationship, that he's the one I love most. But love triangles are places of struggle and conflict. Regardless of what I'd like to think or say, what does the reality of my life show?

What about my wedding ring and the vows I made to Kathy? Do I choose Jesus over Kathy? How can I do that? As hard as it may be that's what Jesus says I must do.

According to my diary, this parish is my most important relationship. That's what I spend most of my time thinking, praying, and writing about and for. However, the parish and Jesus are not necessarily the same thing.

If you knew the thoughts that fill my head and some of the choices I've made, you might conclude that I love myself more than anyone else.

I think you understand what I'm getting at. Our lived reality reveals many different love interests.

If, however, Jesus asks us to love him more than our own parents and children, our own flesh and blood, then he also does so with every aspect of our lives. There can only be one primary relationship in our lives and Jesus says it's to be him. The Lord our God, is a "jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). His demand for primacy isn't limited to our mother and father or our son and daughter. It's a primacy over everyone and everything in our life. Jesus could easily add to his list:

- Whoever loves a friend more than me is not worthy of me.
- Whoever loves work more than me is not worthy of me.
- Whoever loves power, reputation, or wealth more than me is not worthy of me.
- Whoever loves politics, agendas, or ideology more than me is not worthy of me.
- Whoever loves church, denomination, beliefs and practices more than me is not worthy of me.
- Whoever loves themselves more than me is not worthy of me.
- Whoever loves anyone or anything more than me is not worthy of me.

All things ultimately revert to the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7); "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

So, what are the love triangles in your life? What is your most important relationship? Whom do you love the most?

Today's gospel confronts us with the many love triangles in which we all live and struggle. It demands we make a choice. Does that mean we must reject our parents, our children, our spouses, and all other love interests? No, that's not what Jesus is saying or asking. Jesus isn't demanding exclusivity. Jesus is demanding *priority*. Jesus refuses to be just one among our many other love interests.

Jesus' demand for priority, is for our own good as well as the good of our love interests. We can only ever have one primary relationship. That one relationship gives us identity, and our lives meaning and direction. It becomes the lens through which we see the world, other people, and ourselves. It's the foundation on which we build our lives. It guides the choices we make, the words we say, and the ways in which we act toward and relate to others. It sets a path for our lives and determines how we love. Everyone follows something or someone. Why then would we want it to be something or someone other than Jesus, God embodied in human life, flesh, and blood?

So how do we reconcile the right answer, Jesus, with the lived reality of our lives? How do we pick Jesus over our child, our spouse, our mum and dad? How do we look into their faces and say, "I love Jesus more?"

Kyle Idleman* is attributed as saying the following, and it clarifies beautifully what I'm trying to say: "We love others best when we love God most." There is great wisdom in this. When we love God most; when we put God first, it breaks the confines of the triangle and frees love to envelop everyone. No one is left out, excluded, or rejected. God, not ourselves, becomes the source, origin, and inexhaustible supply of our love. This is the same love that called Jesus to the cross to shed his blood for us. This is the same love that energises and emboldens us to take up our cross and follow Jesus. This is the same love that restores our lives for the sake of Jesus. This is the same love with which Jesus continues to love us.

I want to love my wife best. I want to love my children best. I want to love my parents best. I want to love you best. I think we all want to love as best we can. We do that only when we prioritise Jesus first. Those who have encountered the love of the living Christ understand what I mean. You know the depth of love and breadth of grace you share with others when you yourself are filled with love for God and all he is and means for you in Jesus.

We love each other best when we love God most. Amen.

*Quote by Kyle Idleman from *gods at war: defeating the idols that battle for your heart*, Zondervan, 2013.