

**FOLLOW LOVE**  
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Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Glenn Beck sure can draw a crowd as we saw one week ago Saturday at the Lincoln monument. Jesus also attracted crowds. Beck apparently loves a big following. Jesus, as you're about to see, did not. One declined the title "Messiah." The other, so I've heard, is still mulling it over.

As we approach another 911 anniversary, we should keep something in mind. It's one thing to be an American. It's something else to be a Christian, although in some churches and at some rallies it's hard to tell the difference. The nation urges us to take up the flag. Jesus invites us to take up the cross, as we will hear in the gospel lesson (Luke 14:25-33) appointed for this Sunday.

*Large crowds were traveling with Jesus; he turned 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.*

WHOA. Time out. Something's not right about that! Could the one who said love one another, and love your neighbor, and love your enemy also say *hate* your family? If you're shocked and confused you're not the first. Could Jesus have said such a thing? Yes. Did he mean that literally? No. This was not the first or last time Jesus would use hyperbole to make a point.

This is the one who said: *it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven.* He also said: *if you offend or hurt a little child you should be cast into the sea with an anchor tied to your neck.* Makes you wonder how rich cats and child abusers became honored leaders in the church. But I digress. Sort of.

So what's going on here with "hatred" of family?

Jesus was a sage, a teacher of wisdom. He was recovering the neglected heart of his people's tradition, which turns out to be the heart of nearly all religious traditions. Jesus was a master teacher. He taught a certain way of being in this world. And, in case you didn't know, teachers often use hyperbole to make a point. "Hate your family" is a case in point.

Keep in mind that this was not said to people who hadn't gotten as far as loving and caring for their families. Jesus would not, for instance, say such a thing to teenagers. Just imagine a teenager saying this to his or her parents: "I hate you and Jesus said I should!"

No, this was said to people who loved their family too much, in fact, revered them. Jesus lived in a Middle Eastern culture and society and in that time and place allegiance to family, specifically the patriarch of the tribe or clan, was unconditional and absolute. Jesus could see what many of us have seen, that blind allegiance to family, tribe or nation undermines the vision of one world community, the vision and promise that inspired our Great Ancestors, Father Abraham and Mother Sarah. Jesus understood, that for the sake of the peaceable kingdom we will at times turn our back on family and nation in order to embrace this great promise and great hope.

It's true: love is all you need. You must love yourself, your family, your tribe, your neighbor, and your nation. But if you only love yourself, it's not enough. That's pathetic. If you only love your family, it's not enough. That's pathetic. If you only love your

nation, it's not enough. That's pathetic. We are invited to grow up and into Christ, our tradition's icon of universal love.

The lesson continues:

*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

WHOA. Time out, again. Take up a cross? This is not getting any easier.

Apparently Jesus was not interested in boosting church membership. He was interested in discipleship. He was interested in those who would undertake a course of transformation that put their lives, security and comfort at risk for the sake of mending and redeeming the world.

*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Before the cross became jewelry, it was the Roman Empire's favored political instrument of capital punishment and intimidation not unlike public beheadings. Those who undermined the empire's power or status, or exposed its lies were hung out to dry and die on crosses along public highways. Jesus was but one of thousands who met that fate.

By the way, Jesus did not come to earth just to die as we have often heard. Jesus wanted to live. He loved life. He loved tasty bread, good wine, baked fish, lakes, mountains, meadows and conversation with friends. Jesus lived fully and passionately. But, as it turned out, death on the cross was the consequences of the choices he made in that particular time and place. He died not so much *for* the sins of the world, but rather *because of* the sins of the world, including a diabolical political and religious system.

Jesus turned his back on the security offered by the world in order to love boldly. And he warned any who chose to follow him, which is to say, to follow love, to understand the risks of such a life. Certain comforts and securities would be sacrificed.

The lesson continues.

*Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'*

Well, that makes sense. If you're going to start something be sure you can finish it. Which, by the way, is exactly what Jesus did *not* do.

*Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.*

Again, that makes sense. And, again, that is exactly what Jesus did *not* do. The odds were heavily stacked against him. But he went ahead anyway.

The lesson concludes:

*So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*

Which, again, I take to be hyperbole to make a point: you must hold all that you possess including time, privilege, health, and status, lightly, as though you did not need them.

This coming Saturday is the ninth anniversary of 911. American flags will hang everywhere. Some prideful; some sorrowful; some defiant; and some taunting.

One church in Florida has announced it will exuberantly burn copies of the Koran in a blazing bonfire. Patriotism and Christianity will blend once again in an ugly, hateful and

explosive concoction. And now that mosques have been demonized and torched in this country, American Muslims will shiver and cringe in fear.

If you want to follow Jesus and the way of the cross this week, you will stand up for Muslims and Islam.

This coming Saturday, America will pause to remember that heinous criminal act of nine years ago that killed nearly 3,000 people, many of whom were Muslims. Since that fateful day, more than 5,000 American troops have been killed in the war on terror, not to mention—and they seldom are mentioned—tens upon tens of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani citizens killed in the crossfire.

For many years before 911 and for every year since at least 10,000 children on average have died of starvation *every day* while we continue to fret about our security, comfort and conveniences.

What's become of this nation? What's become of this world?

The world doesn't need another war. The world doesn't need more religion. The world doesn't need more religious people.

The world needs big bold lovers to build a just and peaceful world, including that small world you inhabit day in and day out. I'd like to think Mason Thomas Brown was baptized this morning into such a community, a community that devotes itself to equipping, empowering, and inspiring him and others to follow love wholeheartedly.

As our baptism theme song puts it: *Walk with me and I will walk with you and build the land that God has planned where love shines through.*

And when will that happen? When will that world be built? No one knows. It's not like building a house or going to war. You can't estimate the time or the cost. You just go ahead because that's the way of love and love doesn't count the cost.

*I'm going to love this world even if it kills me, said Jesus. I'm going to heal the sick, feed the hungry, befriend the lonely, shelter the homeless, lift up the fallen, soothe the wounded even though I don't know what it will cost or how it will all get done.*

*If you can't walk with me, I understand because I know the way is hard and I don't want to mislead you. Just do the best you can wherever you may be. But if you can, please walk with me. I'd sure like the company.*

You see, when you follow love you have no idea where it will take you, how long it will take, or what it will cost. You just go for the sheer joy of being in love with God and the world—madly in love with all its families, peoples and nations, all its creatures and features great and small.

We don't count the cost. We just go for the sheer joy of being in love.