

I suppose they were following Jesus that day because they wanted to hear what this new teacher had to say, or maybe they hoped to witness one of those incredible healings or some other miracle. All these people are following him and the Gospel says that Jesus turns around and says, "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! So much for "family values." What's going on? Why is Jesus confronting them, and us with such harsh words that we don't even want to consider. What are we to make of this?

Now we have to understand that in the context of Jewish culture that they often communicated by hyperbole; they exaggerated what they said to make a point. You wouldn't just say "whole wheat bread is better than white bread." You'd say "You must love whole wheat bread above all other breads and

detest and abhor white bread for it is anathema to your very soul and those who eat it should be banished from the land.” It was how they got your attention and made a point so you’d never forget it. And Jesus was a master of this literary device, hyperbole.

So, Jesus doesn’t literally mean for us to hate our parents and other members of our families, he was simply saying that if you’re going to follow me, really follow me, then I will have to be more important than your family, that nothing can get in the way of our mission, not even your loved ones. Jesus is saying, “following me must be more important, a higher priority than your own life.” Well that softens the passage in a way, but these words are still an incredible challenge. These words require nothing less than a total and absolute commitment.

Of course if we’re not careful, we’ll slip into thinking that only the perfect, super-spiritual types can achieve this kind of

commitment, as if Jesus is simply culling out all of us who don't quite have our lives together, that if I'm going to be able to commit to following Jesus Christ to this degree that I have to first straighten my life out, perfect myself so that I'm then able to make such a total and perfect commitment. That kind of thinking is a mistake and isn't consistent with the Jesus we know from the biblical story who continuously gathered with and called forth people who were far from perfect. Although there are plenty of voices in our world and the world of organized religion that would reinforce this approach that we have to be perfect to follow Jesus, it's simply not the Gospel and leaves little room for the Grace of God.

Maybe that's why Jesus says to take up your cross and follow me. Jesus knows our lives are a mess. He assumes that we have crosses. We all have crosses to bear in this life for reasons of our own making and often because of situations that

we have no control of or influence over. I believe that the people Jesus is calling forth aren't a bunch of perfect, holy types, but rather in Martin Bell's words, I think they're "a rag tag army" of sinners who instead of trying to beat the problems in our lives to death, choose to take them up, turn them over to God, and simply follow Jesus.

Robert Capon says that "Heaven is populated entirely by forgiven sinners." You know, sinners, the broken people, the ones with messy lives. I know in my life it has been those people, the ones with a bit of tarnish and wear, who in and through their brokenness have ministered most effectively to me.

One of my early mentors had a theory about ministry. She said that the most effective Christian ministry is not orchestrated by committees or commissions of the Church, but rather that it flows out of the brokenness and pain in people's lives. If you

think for just a minute, I'll bet you can think of examples in your own community here of people who have taken the crosses in their lives and allowed God's redemptive power to transform them into something miraculous and life-giving. Jesus calls us today to stop trying to fix the crosses in our lives and to simply follow him. I suspect that the greatest cross that most of us struggle with is this very lie that we are tempted to believe about ourselves, that somehow we aren't good enough to do God's ministry. I find that in the face of so much biblical literalism and fundamentalism that is constantly expressed in American Christianity that I have to remember that as Anglicans we don't believe in instant sanctification, in other words, the belief that we are instantly saved and made perfect. Rather, we believe that sanctification is a process in which we spend a lifetime, by Grace, learning to allow God to transform our lives. I like the way David Buttrick expresses it, he says we are the **being** saved

people of God.

I don't know what the crosses are in your lives, but I hope today that when you come forward to this altar that you'll call them to mind. Not to beat your breast and grovel before God, but to just bring them forward and place them in God's hands at this altar where God does redemptive and marvelous things with crosses and the broken parts of our lives. God waits patiently here not just to receive the good parts of our lives, but also to bear our pain, our shortcomings, our tragedies, the very things that we can do nothing about. God gathers it all up and consecrates it, blesses it, and transforms it into the very food that will sustain us as we follow Christ on this journey to eternal life.

Amen.