

Homily – Blood is thicker than water, but not all water

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Is there any doubt that we live in turbulent times? Well, maybe. There can be no doubt that our democracy is being stressed. We take our great experiment in democracy for granted. I have always believed that civilizations are largely veneers. They are dominated either by a collective social contract built on a respect for law or imposed order built on brute force. Then you get flashes of populist uprisings that reshuffle the deck and lead toward democracy, theocracy, or autocracy. These uprisings are incredibly dangerous in the short term and rarely work out well for the citizenry. Russia's October Revolution gave us Lenin, then Stalin and 30,000,000 comrades killed by the state.

My litmus in evaluating today's politicians is simple—do their actions strengthen or weaken our social contract and the institutions which protect our social contract? I want national leaders who promote peace and tranquility, who strive for justice and mercy, and can reach beyond our specific society to other countries to promote alliances and trade that will enhance our collective security. In “good times” we make choices between leaders of political parties, any of whom would pass my litmus test. In “turbulent times” some of the leaders are addicted to raw power, and our republic faces serious risks of devolution. When this is the case, we say that a person lacks the temperament to be a national leader. So, turbulent times, indeed.

Our Lord lived in a complicated, oppressive society. The Romans ruled, but the Jews had a fair degree of autonomy within their own affairs. Judaism was a theocratic collection of large clans with tough, religious-based rules controlling every aspect of life. But first century Palestine was also richly blessed by a prophetic tradition and a redemptive tradition which promoted self-examination and expression. I love the tradition of two rabbis from opposing religious schools of thought who would travel together and teach Torah. They represented their divergent schools of thought, but they were honored as good and faithful Jews.

Still, overall, Jesus lived in turbulent times when competing power centers vied for religious and political control. Jesus knows that his call to serve God is a threat to these power centers, and therefore, a threat to the Romans who demand adherence to Roman law. First century Jews knew as well as any in the world that Pax Romana was enforced by the tip of a spear.

In this stew of oppression and yearning for independence, Jesus becomes many things to many people; but for most, he is a disruptive force, a prophet and miracle worker loved by the throngs and despised by many Jewish leaders and religious conservatives. They see no good coming from this Galilean who flaunts the Torah in

the name of God's service. They see Jesus' itinerant preaching leading to one of two bad outcomes—the religious authorities will be undermined, or the Romans will see Jesus as an insurrectionist and put him down, taking the Jewish leadership with him.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives perhaps his harshest words about his ministry's impact within Israel.

“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

This is no meek and mild Jesus calling the children forward to be blessed. There's not a hint of joy in his tone. What are we to make of these words? Is Jesus ***describing*** the inevitable result of following him, or is he ***prescribing*** a new social contract in which honoring one's father and mother is a lesser demand to the imperative, “Come and follow me”? I believe Jesus is calling us to reprioritize our relationships around God's Kingdom, around the prophetic call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Christians, followers of Jesus, are not to rely on our ancestry—our bloodline, to define our covenant with God. That is behind the challenging adage, “God has no grandchildren.” We must accept the invitation, “Come.” And then we must follow, even if that means radically altering our familial relationships.

I believe this to my core. It is my baptismal covenant which marks who I am, and how I am to journey in this life. Nevertheless, I am profoundly committed to and intertwined with my family: my wife, adult children, their spouses who are as much family as my children, my brothers, nieces and nephews, cousins. Yes, I include the family dog as well. I love them all and spend the vast majority of my waking time with them---including a family BBQ this afternoon. But when God calls, I must answer even if this means standing aside from those I love.

It is so very easy to get compromised and consumed by family demands that we don't take time to climb the hill and listen for that still small voice. Not everyone in my family shares my articles of belief, some our more devout than I, others less. But what my family does do is allow space for encountering God and being led, even if it leaves others scratching their heads.

I've lived the tension between being a priest and having a broad family, and heaven knows that my family has endured the tension of having a priest in the family. But this is a tension all families have if they are populated by Christians. We follow Christ, first. We hope that this will bear good fruit in all of our relationships, but

sometimes, in some families, following Christ leads to scorn and division. Christians must never play the part of a victim, nor are we more favored by God than anyone else. Our sole claim is that we belong to God by virtue of the water in which we have been baptized.

So while you have heard many time that blood is thicker than water, I tell you that this not so, at least not when it comes to the water of baptism and the viscous chrism by which your baptism has been sealed.

Jesus said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am constrained until it is accomplished." This reference to his death on Calvary has indeed been accomplished. Our Lord is no longer constrained. Let us align our lives in this freedom and love those God gives to us without constraint. I tell you that this is the perfect and only antidote we can affect in today's turbulent times.