

Family Tradition
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 69:7-13b
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 10:34-39

Our son, Seth, turns 29 next week, which seems an affront to reason even though I can't get the math to work out differently. He is the musician in the family, and something I have always loved about Seth is the breadth of his eclectic musical taste, from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* to Chet Baker's *I Fall in Love too Easily* to Charles Mingus' *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* to Paul Simon's *Poem on an Underground Wall* to Hot Rize's *Working on a Building* to Flight of the Conchords' *The Most Beautiful Girl (in the Room)*.

Seth can make a great playlist, though he has never shown much interest in whatever is the current Top Ten List, and he was always decidedly averse to classic Country music. So, imagine my surprise last year, when during a visit, Seth came down the hall singing, "*Hank, why do you drink, Hank, why do you roll smoke? Why must you live out the songs that you wrote?*" Do you know the song? "*I say, 'Leave me alone, I'm singing all night long, it's a family tradition'*"

I heard that and just about spit-showered my milk and cereal all over the kitchen floor. Hank Williams, Jr! It was as hilarious as it was completely

unexpected. Seth proceeded to tell me he was working up a repertoire of Johnny Cash songs so he could crush the next karaoke night with his colleagues at the Commerce Department. I have no doubt that he will. He's always been able to make us laugh.

And wouldn't you know it, that this week when I read today's text and its portents of familial dysfunction and toxic relationships, that old Hank Williams, Jr song became the ear worm of my week.

“For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.” ...It's a family tradition. You know, Hank Williams, Sr., the Hillbilly Shakespeare, only lived 29 years, but he packed a whole lot of chaos into his brief life. He had a band by the age of 15, and had his own radio show on WSPA soon after. Yet, at an age most kids are pondering application to graduate school, Williams was getting kicked off his radio show because of his alcoholism. The coming years would feature two marriages, a girlfriend, a disputed child, an addiction to painkillers, getting fired from the Grand Ol' Opry, and

becoming the definitive country music star along the way. The son's life would rival the father's for all its chaos and drama.

Such family traditions of pathology and turmoil are created in family systems without regard to socio-economic status. Loretta Lynn, the coal miner's daughter, defied her father to go marry Dew. I read this week of a fraught mother/daughter relationship in a more high-priced zip code. The daughter, uncomfortable with her family's significant wealth, wanted a small, minimalist wedding, a picnic table reception, jam jars replacing flutes for the champagne.

Mama wasn't having it, so she covertly conspired with a wedding planner to get the things she wanted by conning the daughter into thinking it was included in the basic contract. What the mom didn't count on was getting drunk at the reception and divulging the details of the deception to her daughter. The daughter may have been wearing white but her eyes were flames and her cheeks were a furious shade of fire engine red, and wedding heaven instantly became wedding hell.

The perpetual diet of shows like *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Knot's Landing*, *The Royals*, *Downton Abbey*, *Yellowstone*, *Succession* — these are caricatures/

exaggerations of the family drama, internecine battles, insidious jealousies, and paralyzing polarities that mark relations in families, communities, institutions, and nations.

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.”

A glance at the day's news diet of violence, or a rehearsal of neighborhood gossip, or the viral video of rage at the school board meeting, or the politics of seating arrangements at the wedding, or the appeasement of the mercurial relative — These could all be submitted as evidence that if the sword was what Jesus intended, he achieved everything he predicted and more. You can't even escape it in Fantasyland at Disney World. Everything, it seems, is kindling for conflict. But was it actually Jesus' intention to light the fuse of all manner of family feuds? Was Jesus stating an intention or observing the reality of life when love gets mixed up with sinful humanity?

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth...” That sure doesn’t seem to square with what we know about the savior. “And he shall be called ... Prince of Peace” — “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” — “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” — While the Prodigal “was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” — “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” — “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” — “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister” — “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” So, what are we to make of Jesus saying, I have not come to bring peace, but a sword?

It is helpful here to understand something concerning the people who first heard this text in Matthew’s community, the community to whom

Matthew directs his gospel. The phrase, *take up the cross*, would have held little meaning for Jesus' disciples at this point of their journey. Jesus wouldn't even refer to his own future appointment with the cross until two chapters later. However, some forty to sixty years later up in, perhaps, Antioch, Syria where Matthew's community may have been gathering, Christians were beginning to endure violence, and yes, crucifixion, in a pogrom initiated during Nero's reign in Rome. Thus, being identified as a Christ follower could eventuate in the violence of a cross.

Remember that Matthew's community, many of whom had grown up joining the pilgrimages to Jerusalem and its Temple for worship and sacrifice, carry with them the frightening images of Roman swords and the violence of Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD. In addition, many members of Matthew's congregation had experienced ruptures within their own family systems because of their decision to follow Jesus. Conflict and turmoil and tension were not the purpose or intention of Jesus, but rather the consequence of and reaction to the presence of love and truth.

Jesus is speaking to the reality that love is disruptive. It will not always be met with joy, but will often be greeted with hostility. If you doubt

that, watch the video of Freedom riders escaping a burning bus in Anniston, Alabama or marchers being beaten on a bridge over in Selma. The riders and protesters weren't seeking confrontation but were just acting on a love that dignifies everyone equally. Such love is threatening to those who would limit dignity and love to the select groups they deem as worthy.

If you doubt that the presence of love and truth may encounter hostility, ask one of the multitude of children who just want to love and be loved, but have been judged, excluded, or disowned because the person they choose to love does not fit the profile of family or church expectations. And isn't it insane that the rationale for such hostility co-opts the name of Jesus, as if Jesus' love is prejudicial and choosy and the candidates are measured and appraised like the players at the NFL combine? What does Jesus ask us? "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" Jesus touched the leper, praised the Samaritan, ate with sinners and tax collectors, welcomed the children, honored the Centurion, found a friend in an outcast. It is never wise to use Jesus' name to justify exclusion.

Yes, love disrupts, exposing our prejudice, questioning our attitudes, calling us to the vulnerability of hospitality. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Of course, this means that Jesus stands before us, blocking that path of least resistance that is so attractive to us. We’re uncomfortable with the vulnerability that love demands. We like that path of least resistance that coddles our vulnerabilities, avoids awkwardness, not demanding anything from us. Which is why Jesus says what he says next: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

Now, that sounds a bit strange to our ears. We live in a land where we are expected to say I love my family first. To say otherwise would be to betray all socially acceptable norms. How can Jesus ask us to love him more than our child? However, Jesus understands that the claim, *I love my family first*, is actually an incomplete sentence. We prefer not to vocalize the rest of the thought, and probably can’t admit it to ourselves but, *I love my family first*, is only half our motivation. *I love my family first ... as long as they do what I want them to do, be who I want them to be, act in ways that reflect well on me, achieve for my ego what I couldn’t achieve on my own, believe what I*

believe, love who I find acceptable, do nothing that would embarrass me. Jesus understands that when we say, *I love my family first*, more often than not, we're implying some measure of those other things as well.

Consider the mother/daughter/wedding planner triangle I mentioned earlier. Daughter wants a simple wedding without ostentation. Mom schemes for something more. Ask Mom, and she'd claim she did what she did out of love for her daughter. She may have loved her daughter, but her scheme was not about love, not really.

A feature in *The Atlantic* this month offered *The Confessions of a Luxury Wedding Planner*. (*The Atlantic, Xochitl Gonzalez*) Now, for me as a pastor this falls in the category of "Don't get me started, or we'll be here all day." But one statistic speaks volumes. "Last year, approximately 13,000 weddings in America cost \$1 million or more." 13,000 — \$1 million **or more!** I'd venture that a good percentage of those dollars had very little to do with love. Case in point — The author/wedding planner said, "I once worked with a bride who had all her wedding gifts sent to our office. I was confused until I realized that it gave her an excuse to keep stopping by. She knew that her fiancé was cheating on her, and she needed someone to talk with about it.

They still got married, though, and had a resplendent wedding brunch.”

Instagram approved. Love — seriously?

Speaking of the mother/daughter tensions, the wedding planner confessed that while the daughter wanted an unostentatious affair, her mom had something else in mind, and called the wedding planner in a panic. The daughter had gone off and planned what she “imagined” was an “average wedding.” “The mother had started poking around and realized, *This is terrible!* Her daughter didn’t just have conflicted ideas about her own privilege. She also had bad taste ... Her daughter could pretend all she wanted, her mother said, but their friends and family knew that they were rich and were expecting a nice affair.” And thus, the wedding became less about love and more about pride and image.

“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” Jesus is not wiping out the Fifth Commandment. Jesus is pointing out how we can actually honor the Fifth Commandment. Could it be that Jesus is saying something like this? —

“I don’t doubt that you love your family, or at least want to love your family, but I took a look at your file and can see that you are woefully

lacking in tools for this task. Your history reveals that your ego, pride, self-interest, and fear keep getting in the way; and let's face it, you have not acquired the chainsaw to cut through all that to get to the place of selfless love. So (could Jesus be saying?), here's what we can do. Since I know you and have learned how to put up with you, loving you in spite of yourself, you just focus your effort on loving me as best you can, and I will teach you how and equip you to love mom and dad, love the little yous running around your house, love your irritable cousin Jane, and even Frank over in accounting. That's the only way this will work, because if its up to you alone, you'll never make it."

(Could Jesus be saying?) "I mean, look around you. I've stopped reading the paper; you all are doing so poorly. So, again, (Jesus says)? Love me, and I'll at least get you in the vicinity of selfless love. Remember what I told you folks over in John — 'the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you.' So, got it? Love me, and I'll get you through the chaos and conflict out there. Love me, and I can get you to the place that at least resembles selfless love." Could it be that this is what Jesus is telling us? Amen.