

Let's get one thing straight right away: while Jesus did use hyperbole, he absolutely meant what he said. The point of today's Gospel is not to shape our feelings, but our priorities. We know that Jesus was fond of pointing out hypocrisy, and quite adept at doing so. Many of those in the "large crowds" who were following Jesus around at this point in his public ministry were probably originally drawn to listen by his fearless exposure of the hypocrisy and corruption of the elite. That's just good clean fun, right? Who among us doesn't enjoy turning on late-night comedy, or tuning in talk radio, or opening the editorial page and having our prejudices affirmed, and the hypocrisy of opposing factions exposed?

It would be the ultimate irony if the great scourge of hypocrites were himself exposed as one. And the evidence of Jesus's love of family is overwhelming: not only did Jesus rely on Peter's family in Galilee and the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany to provide food and shelter and a "base of operations," he invited brothers to be among his 12 closest disciples. Above all, Jesus's love and care for his own mother, and the synergy of their wills, stand out as profound. So what's going on in today's Gospel? Could Jesus be fed up with family? He had the same feelings we all do, and I think every one of us could relate to that. All of us have had moments when the people closest to us have driven us crazy. Parents, siblings, spouses, and children, all the people we love, know exactly where to push our buttons. In heated moments, we may even say we hate them. And yet, we forgive them. Hmmm. Maybe what we have today is not profound hypocrisy but deep authenticity.

On another occasion, Jesus had said that he came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Did he forget about the fifth commandment then, the one about honoring your mother and your father? And why did he go straight from telling his followers to hate their closest family to telling them to consider the cost of building a tower or fighting a war? Not only is that abrupt, but the Gospels also portray most of Jesus's followers as being ordinary people, peasants, not the sort who would ever undertake an ambitious building project, much less decide weighty matters of state. No wonder people said he was crazy.

Love has a way of making you crazy. (I've been there.) But since Jesus's love was for all humanity, and indeed all Creation, well, it's remarkable that he was able to attract any followers at all. Luke tells us that Jesus spoke the difficult words of today's Gospel to "large crowds," plural, who were "traveling with him." Not the same as "following him," that is, being his disciple, but better than ignoring him, or plotting to kill him. And Luke tells us that Jesus "*turned* and said to them." Parchment was expensive and Luke was a meticulous writer even by the elevated standards of the age. So we can conclude that this detail, of Jesus turning, is not an accident. Jesus had "set his face toward Jerusalem" back in chapter nine, that is, with a determination of purpose, Jesus began his journey to his mission, his destiny, his death on the cross. It's only fair of him to warn the crowds of what they are getting themselves into, give them a chance to turn

back and a warning of what lies ahead.

That's why he doesn't just say they must "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters," he says they must even hate "life itself." That's a clue that Jesus isn't talking about the emotion of hate, or acts of antagonism. And remember that elsewhere, Jesus said he had come to bring us life. When we hear Jesus talking about "hating" today, we are hearing a literal translation of an ancient figure of speech. Jesus is talking about what we must be willing to give up in order to be his followers, what we must *consciously* love less than we love him. To drive the point home, Jesus names things that our human nature makes us prize above all else, the things we protect by instinct. This goes deeper than the messages and pressures of society that I talked about last Sunday.

Jesus's mission isn't just deeply counter-cultural, it also contradicts our own most primal impulses. But this doesn't mean we're hopeless. Far from it. Before we even talk about spirituality and theology, we can take some hope in what we see all around us. We achieve great things by suppressing our primal impulses, things like society and economy, peace and prosperity, things we are right to value. But still just things, and imperfect things. If we can overcome our instincts for these lesser things, we can also overcome them for Jesus and his mission.

And his mission did connect with the needs of the world, on an immediate, material level. Remember that for all the injustice in the world today, Jesus's day was worse. His world was a brazen and brutal system of occupation, colonialism, and slavery, with no effective resistance movement, no concept of an abolition movement, no hope of change from within nor from any foreign power, so great was the might of Rome, the sole superpower of the age.

The hope of ordinary people lay not in society, nor in organizations, but in God. This is clear not only when we hear of crowds following Jesus, but also when we learn that the have-nots, the exploited, of the ancient world, loved a genre of literature that terrifies people today. Apocalyptic literature promised that the injustice of the world was not permanent, that God would intervene and topple the exploiters, breaking their system beyond repair. Properly taught, apocalyptic literature should give us hope and confidence, too.

That's why Paul was more concerned with the spiritual life and relationships between Onesimus, Philemon, and his household, than in destroying the institution of slavery. Paul and most Christians of his day believed that the whole system of exploitation, including slavery, was about to be destroyed. They expected that God was about to intervene in history in a dramatic way, and therefore the Christian's responsibility was to prepare for this as best they could, in two main ways. First, by telling as many people as possible what God wanted and was doing, and second, by ordering their own lives to match, as much as possible, the ways of the new order that God was bringing to the world.

This was quite logically reflected in Christian worship, where all were equal; no one was given a leadership role, or excluded from leadership, based on their place in secular society. Paul was counting on this second expectation when he wrote his letter to Philemon, interceding for Onesimus not on the basis of humanity or natural law, but their identity as Christians, an identity Onesimus now shared equally with his master since Paul had baptized him. The letter can't tell us what happened next, but its existence does, since Philemon would not have preserved the letter and allowed it to be circulated if he had not obeyed Paul.

Philemon would have paid a cost in freeing Onesimus, not merely losing the monetary value of a slave, but also defying the expectations of his peers. By not only refusing to torture or kill a runaway slave, but actually rewarding him with freedom, Philemon did undermine the whole institution, and that must not have gone over well. Society's haves, Philemon's peers, must have thought he was crazy. They knew he was putting their lifestyle and livelihood at risk. All because Philemon chose to follow the Christian principle over social norms and his innate fears of ostracism and loss, chose to define his life and his family according to Jesus's new law of love.

Like us, Philemon had a comfortable life. Like us, he was never at serious risk of being killed for being a follower of Jesus, but he still had to pay a price. So what about us? Are we willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel? Or rather, are we willing to go as far as Jesus wants us to go?

Today's Gospel shows that Jesus doesn't want superficial attention; he wants us to think long and hard about what we are willing to give up if we would follow him. This question, what will we risk, is even more important than determining if you have enough materials before you start a construction project, or enough soldiers to defeat a hostile army, for buildings and even nations come and go.

Sure we are willing to follow Jesus while he is entertaining us, while he is taking down fat targets, while he is making us feel better. That's so easy, large crowds do it. Are we willing to become targets ourselves? Are we willing to go where we're needed, to have conversations that make us uncomfortable, to give at a level that requires us to change our lifestyle? Are we willing to risk the things that are most precious to us, our possessions, our relationships, our very lives, in order to keep following Jesus? When they start handing out crosses, will we reach out our arms to pick one up?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who followed Jesus to martyrdom, wrote, "The life of discipleship can only be maintained as long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves... . The disciple always looks only to his master."