
Imagine Something Greater

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18, Year C

Jesus 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. -Luke 14:26

Really? Jesus says that I cannot be his disciple if I do not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself?

My own father had a serious accident this summer, a fall; and he ended up in the Grady Hospital Intensive Care Unit for three nights. His family, all of us, dropped what we were doing. We flew, we drove, we got to Grady as soon as we could. Grady ICU, as usual, did a fine job. But what we all needed was love. My father needed love. His wife and sons and daughters needed love. I needed love. And we loved.

He is remarkably better now, and he was back home after those three nights. Uncomfortable, but back home. And he still needed love. And we all needed love. We gave it to each other. Our love was powerful, and we were all changed by it.

Imagine, however. Imagine something even more powerful. Imagine something even more powerful than loving attachments. Imagine something greater, even greater than that loving attachment we give to our parents and our children.

Let's start with simple attachments. Imagine something so powerful and fascinating and awesome that it turned your attention, turned your attention away from things that you thought were fun, even turned your attention away from things you thought were healthy.

What if there were something so good and wonderful that it made you turn away from drugs or alcohol? Not something that tore you away from drugs or alcohol; it just became more fascinating and interesting than drugs or alcohol.

What if there were something greater that turned you away from anger and complaint? What if there were something that was simply more enjoyable and life-giving than anger and complaint? Imagine something greater.

What if there were something that turned you away from watching screens and television every day? Not something that jerked you away. It just became more interesting.

Imagine something greater even than the very good things that we enjoy in life, greater than even our friends and family. Can something be greater than those loving relationships? Can something be greater than those relationships without taking us away from those relationships?

Imagine. Jesus presents us today with that possibility. There is something greater. There is something greater. And there is certainly something greater than mere titles and names, titles like "father" and even "country." There is something greater than "country" something greater than the name, "heaven."

Like the rest of us, John Lennon had his weaknesses; but he was on to something when he sang, "Imagine there's no heaven. No countries. No religion." "No possessions," he sang. He was somehow pointing out to us that mere titles, concepts, names – names like heaven and country—were not so important as people living

together in peace. It is our holding on to titles and concepts, instead of holding on to real people, that gets in the way of living life in peace.

This, I believe, is part of what Jesus has in mind with these upsetting comments in today's gospel. "Whoever does not hate father and mother wife and children and sister and brother and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

Don't say that flippantly to us, when we are caring for our fathers and mothers and children. The point is that there is something greater. There is something greater than the concepts themselves.

There is easily something greater than our addictions, things like alcohol and drugs and dopamine. And there is something greater than our screens and possessions and computers. But there is even something greater than the attachments we consider quite good, like family and friends.

The Bible tells a frequent story about our human tendency to turn to other gods. "Don't go after other gods," the Book of Deuteronomy says today. But what happens, as we all know, is that things that were once good for us, can also become false gods for us. They can prevent us from seeing something greater, something beyond, something that gives us eternal life. Even good things can prevent us from God.

And, so, these words from Deuteronomy have frequently become my own guiding words, in this troubled world of competing addictions, this troubled world of competing attractions. Everything wants my attention and my energy.

"Choose life," says our Lord God in the Book of Deuteronomy (30:19). "See, I have set before you life and death, curses and blessings. Choose life" Choose life.

Don't choose the mere concept. Don't choose the mere title. Don't choose the mere name or idea of something. There is something greater! Choose life! Choose what gives life to us and to the world. Choose vaccines and work permits and freedom for people. Choose life!

Life is dropping everything to go see our father or mother in the hospital. Life is tending to our children instead of ourselves. Life is paying attention to individual people, without regard for names or titles or country or religion. Choose something greater! Life is loving people. I am thankful that it is my own father, my father, who has taught me so much about something greater, who has taught me about love.

Ah! Some of you have listened to this whole sermon. Some of you have stayed with me until the end. And some of you may even understand what I am trying to say. And, yet, you notice one word of Jesus, that seems to contradict what I have said. "Even life itself," said Jesus.

I have been emphasizing the Deuteronomy passage which says, "Choose Life," but you notice that Jesus says one must hate "life" itself. One must hate even life itself?

Well, the answer is a place that I have not yet reached in my own prayer, in my own spiritual practice. And it sure takes a lot of practice. There comes a point, according to Jesus, that this "Something greater" turns out to be even greater than our very life. That point came to Jesus, of course. And I am not yet ready for that point to come to me. But it will. There will come a point that we give up our life.

Jesus mentions that puzzle several times in his life and ministry. "The one who gives up his or her life, will find it." Jesus is talking about finding something even greater than what we thought was life.

My spiritual life, my spiritual practice, is a process of giving up my life every day. And it is impossible for me. I surrender. I give it up. And then I wake up tomorrow taking a little bit of it back again. I have to. I have to do the chores and supply my physical needs.

But there is something greater. Jesus proclaims that. And we proclaim it, too, from this church, week after week, and day after day, even if we have not fully grasped that reality yet. We learn, daily, how to give up lesser things in life so that we can enjoy the greater things in life. Choose something greater! Choose life!

Join us. Join this church. Join this community of life. Help us witness to that something greater. There is something greater! Choose new life! Over and over and over again.

AMEN.

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