

Do hard things. A title I blatantly stole from a book by two teenagers. Written for teenagers by twin brothers Alex and Brett Harris, they maintain that teenagers are underestimated and underutilized. Adults tend to think teenagers nowadays are lazy, underachieving slugs \_ no offense – and they treat them that way with no expectations of anything greater. And because we don’t expect much from them, teens don’t expect anything from themselves. These two brothers challenge teens to take up a cause, do hard things, and expect great things from themselves. I recommend it by the way. Good book.

Paul asked Philemon to do a hard thing. To treat Onesimus, his former slave, an equal.

And I really wish that Luke had lost his notes the day he wrote this down! Talk about hard things! This is one of the hardest sayings in the Gospels. Hate your mother and father? Surely He doesn’t mean that?

Oh, I know – it’s a translation thing, right? Translating any language is no easy task – especially ancient NT Greek! So I looked it up...

*Miseo* -- from a primary *misos* (hatred): to hate, pursue with hatred, detest. 2. to be hated, detested ... OK – so that’s not it.

Maybe Luke just got it wrong. He was after all writing it down 60 or so years after the fact. That’s prob’ly it. It got warped and changed over the years like an ancient game of telephone. Luke was Greek – maybe he didn’t quite understand the nuances and colloquialisms of Aramaic – the actual language that Jesus and his contemporaries in Palestine spoke back then.

But if Luke got it wrong, so did Matthew. Look this up – pew bible, p. 16 Matthew 10:34-39 “

*“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; <sup>36</sup> and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.*

*<sup>37</sup> 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; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*

I don't think I like that very much. I love my mother and father – a LOT. I know that the love a parent has for child can be the strongest love known to humankind. How can Jesus possibly want us to hate our parents and children?

In Matthew Jesus simply cautions against loving family “more than me.” Luke is the one that uses the word Hate.

In our world today, the word hate is really a loaded word - charged with emotion. To us, it's the very opposite of love and it suggests a deeply visceral and negative response to something, or someone – repulsion... synonyms for 'hate' include: loathe, detest, despise, , abhor, execrate

But remember the honor & shame based society of first century Palestine?

In Jesus' world...to hate your family meant doing something that injured them, particularly by disgracing them. Bringing shame on them. Life was centered around family, and the honor of the family was paramount, as we talked about last week. Every family member was expected to protect the honor of the family. If some members joined a suspect movement and abandoned their home, this brought disgrace on the whole family...

Imagine -- if a son, daughter, father or mother suddenly ran off to join some cult. There are Roman letters that survive complaining that a family member had join this group called Christians.

So here's a dilemma. The church has been preaching family values to me ever since I can remember. Hearth and home and all that?

WE all love the whole idea of family, and the church of the 50's and 60's was all about the suburban dream of a mommy and a daddy and 2.5 kids and cat and dog and white picket fence – but the world is evolving. I don't need to remind you that the divorce rate has more than doubled in the past 25 years. 20% of children live in one parent families.

Even the definition of family has changed! A Mom – a Dad –one or the other -- sometimes both – 2 moms – 2 dads – blended families from two unrelated families becoming a new family? We have to have some new flexibility in how we understand the concept of what a family is and what a family CAN be. WE are a family. The church – the congregation. The person sitting next to you is your brother or your sister.

But Jesus never really taught family relations. Think about it.

What Jesus talked about was leaving home – literally and figuratively leaving the family. A stranger in strange land – not of this world.

Leaving home is essential to developing a relationship with God. It was for me anyway. I left home – more than once, I might add – to go to college when I was 18. That’s a common one. Lots of folks do that. In fact, I went to college and my dad got transferred to England! Since when do the mommy and daddy birds shove the chick out of the nest and fly off to England? The baby birds gotta leave. It’s part of growing into adulthood.

On figurative level, the home & family I left was the safety of my comfortable rut of alcohol and substance abuse – and all the life choices and unhealthy relationships that went with it. The say you only have to change one thing to stay sober – everything. I went to residential rehab three times but I only left “home” once: the time I gave it all up and surrendered my life – my everything – to God.

Adam & Eve left Eden. Abraham Sarah had to move – “Go West until I tell you to stop,” God said, and they went! Jacob wandered. Jonah ran away from God. Joseph left home – not by choice, but it certainly changed his life! Jesus teaches this too. Stories about sons who leave home, lost sheep, outcast women at the well.

Jesus himself left home. Drop your nets and follow me. Stop fishing. Have you ever tried to tell a fisherman to stop fishing? What is a fisherman who doesn’t fish anymore? That’s his whole identity!

Maybe that’s what this is about. Identity. Who are you?

I am an uncle, a grandson, a son, a nephew, a grad student, a pastor, even a singer, but none of these things define me. They are not my identity. I am an alcoholic, and addict – a drunk and junkie, if you will – but my past is not my identity. It is only a part of me it does not define me.

Our past no longer defines who we are. We take the hard step and go to college. We do the hard thing and agree to rehab. We stand up to that bully. We do the hard thing and forgive that person we’ve been holding a grudge against for so long. Sometimes we do the hard thing and leave that abuser after all those years.

It’s a hard thing to stand up for what you believe in – to do the right thing. It’s a hard thing sometimes to even admit to being a Christian!

But I am Brad – child of God, Christ follower. I am this first before anything

Here's another dilemma: When Annie called me this week, she was very apologetic about having to miss church in order to go be her Parents during this extremely trying time. Her father Gene may not make it through the weekend she told me. So I told her without thinking that she needed to stop worrying about playing for us and to go and be with her mom and dad. Family comes first, I said.

And I thought about it as I was writing this message and thinking on this passage, and I wondered: Should I have told Annie that church was more important than visiting family? Is that the hard thing that Jesus is asking of us – of Annie?

When I was interning as associate pastor in AZ and my mom passed away, the senior pastor didn't hesitate to tell me to take the time to go and be there for my family. Should I have stayed and ministered to the youth of the church?

I don't think so. It just feels wrong. It doesn't feel like love, does it?

It's hard to reconcile these words of Jesus, but I think as long as we're doing the right thing – loving those who need loving, lifting up those who need lifting up. Ensuring that that someone breathes a little easier because of something I did. THAT is loving Jesus more than anything. THAT is putting God first.

We all go through times in our lives where we feel unloved or unlovable – when we feel that God has maybe abandoned us – isn't there for us. You know, “God, where are you?!?!” That's when we need to step up and be Jesus for that person who feels abandoned by God, unloved, and alone.

That's where the second part of this comes in, too. Counting the cost. Jesus may have actually been trying to discourage every Tom Dick and Harry from trying to become followers. At this point Jesus knows what's going to happen, the crowds are getting out of hand and most of them are there for the signs and the miracles and the healings – what a show! You gotta see this guy! He's like Criss Angel or David Copperfield! He's a star and magician! Jesus wants people who will go the distance and understand what it means to pick up the cross. I'm not sure Jesus even said that about the cross before he was crucified. That may be something added by Luke. But if he did, nobody knew what he was talking about! Persecution, martyrdom, those are some hard things. Jesus wanted followers that would count the cost and do hard things.

Counting the cost. I thought it would be really cool to be a music teacher, so went off to music school and discovered that I'd have to practice – A LOT!

Later I thought that acting was where I belonged. I'm good at that so I auditioned for a prestigious acting school in CA and I got in! After a year of that I realized – after counting the cost – I realized that I'd have to exercise and go on audition after audition – I'd have to take roles I didn't like or approve of. I'd have to do commercials for things like Pepto Bismol! After counting the cost, I decided that that wasn't for me.

And nobody ever counts the cost of becoming an alcoholic – imagine if they did! It sneaks up on you too fast. We can only count that cost after the fact...

But being a follower of Christ... As Galileo said, “I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.”

Jesus doesn't want us run off willy-nilly and become a Christian! Right here, Jesus says “Think!” He wants us to think about it. We have the ability to think about what Jesus is asking. And not once for all but every time. When Annie has to decide about playing for us or visiting her parents. Jesus wants her to count the cost. When I decided to become a pastor, the process is long with lots of committees and hoops to jump through – to enable us to count the cost...

Being a Christ follower is a hard thing.

**"Leaving Home,"** by Nancy Rockwell, *The Bite in the Apple*, 2013.

"To learn, to encounter, to unravel mystery, to belong to God alone, all these require leaving, really leaving, in order to be open to the unexpected and unknown presence of God, who will be found not according to the rules, and not by the book, and not in the customary places, and not without fear, passion, deep prayer, and reflection on the strangers you have found each day, and the homelessness you have known."