

Gathering Sunday, September 7, 2025

Anyone who refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters...can't be my disciple.

That's a tough reading for the week. In the words of the Rev. Dr. E. Trey Clark, it's one of those readings to which "If you can't say Amen, let me hear you say "ouch".

That's a tough reading for a close-knit church community, in which our families are everything to us, everyone we hold up in prayer and light each week, our families are everyone who has walked with us to this very point today.

That's a tough reading because it has been used improperly and unjustly throughout the history of the church, by manipulative religious leaders who seek to use God's word to divide and isolate people.

It's such a tough reading that I asked Merry to read from The Message, the most softened and modernized translation I could find, because most translations go not a step further, but a mile further.

Most translations interpret that passage as Jesus saying "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"

Now I'm glad I'm on my way to Seminary this week, because that's a whole different level. I don't have the academic skill and background knowledge to accurately talk about the nuances of how a Greek word that

essentially means “to love less” came to find “hate” as its English equivalent. At least, I don’t have that skill yet. When this reading rolls around again in three years, if I’m still around, we’ll dig into it.

Even absent the word “hate”, which we have way too much of floating around right now in our world, we can’t get around the truth that Jesus, who we equate with the purest, the most unconditional form of love, is talking about “loving less”, and loving less is not something we do well in this church. In fact, if you were around a few years ago, you might remember Dr. Joanne Terrell preaching a powerful message from this pulpit about loving much.

To love much, Dr. Terrell told us, means recognizing the relationship of Justice to love. Love gives you rights, she tells us, and love and justice are not unrelated, they are closely related, like a friend who sticks closer than a sibling.

Love is a calling, says Dr. Terrell, and to do justice, to love much, means the work of becoming aware of our family and neighbor’s rights, as well as their needs, and by neighbor, we can think individually and collectively and locally and globally.

The smaller the circle, the smaller the person, she tells us. Love is a calling, and to love much is to think in complex ways about justice, and to do justice in this day and age.

I think that’s exactly what Jesus, through Luke’s Gospel, is telling us here. Earlier in the chapter, he had just eaten a Sabbath dinner with the top leaders of the Pharisees, and speaking truth to power, told them a parable in which esteemed and powerful guests were invited to a similar dinner, and each had something more important to do.

The host, enraged, demanded to a servant to get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the

misfits and homeless and down-and-out you can lay your hands on, and bring them here, as the recipients of this great meal.

A short time later, Jesus puts that lesson into action, and walking with a very similar crowd, he reveals that while the net is cast wide, and is ever inclusive, there's a cost associated with a seat at his table. There's a cost associated with discipleship, and that cost is to love much, as Dr. Terrell dares us, to draw the circle wider. To put justice in front of comfort, even when loving much looks like loving less.

For the entirety of this year, we've been living with real-life examples of the cost of discipleship every day, examples that are both inspiring and exhausting. Who would have thought, a year ago, that the cost of speaking out against genocide in an academic setting would include being plucked off the street, incarcerated, and threatened with deportation? It happened, still happens, and yet, we still have people prioritizing justice every day over the safety of a quiet life with their closest family and friends. That's what Jesus calls us to do. Love much, even if it means letting go of self. To sort out the conflicts of loyalty that we face each day according to some priority, and to root that priority in justice and mercy.

In this space, where we can still talk about tough things surrounded by a cushion of relative privilege and safety, it means continuing to engage and invest.

It means showing up, and participating in a community that gathers each week to simply state, we love much, and to watch the returns of that love surround and envelop us.

We love much.

On Friday night we kicked off this Gathering weekend with a dance party in this space, guided by the expert DJ skills of Heidi Tringe, who knows exactly how to roll in a portable speaker to any space and bring the party. I estimate the ages of the crowd spanned about 70 years, and whether it was dancing all night, deep conversations with friends, walking through

the surrounding woods, or eating delicious desert, everyone got something they needed. Not everything, but something (Susan, we promise more opportunities for foxtrots and jitterbugs next time, and look forward to learning the art of social dancing).

Now there are certainly better venues for a dance party than the OMH Parish House, and there are certainly events with more of a focus on institutional advancement or personal learning, but that's not the point. The point is that a wide variety of people came out, simply to have a good time with each other, and trust that there is a bigger plan, a greater reason for the establishment of this community, a community in which our purpose is to love much.

And on this Gathering Sunday, despite the tireless efforts of our committees, the careful planning of our executive board, the reality, and the miracle is that each and every one of you showed up, simply because you did. Nobody was scheduled to be here, nobody was asked to be here. We simply opened the doors wide, and you took time out of a busy week of a busy season to love much. Together.

You took time to be a part of a greater plan that we don't even begin to understand, but a plan that surrounds us each and every day. Remember the solar eclipse two Aprils ago? If you were here, in the path of totality, take a moment and remember the strange and surreal energy that surrounded you...not just a shift in light, but a deep feeling of being part of a perfectly executed plan...because you were. It turns out that there was a lot going on around us. During two recent eclipses, researchers measured bioelectrical signals in spruce trees, setting up a series of sensors that could continuously collect data during the event.

Their data revealed that hours before the eclipse, the signals became more synchronized. The trees were able to anticipate the event, and change their bioelectrical behavior to gear up for impending effects like drops in sap flow. Most notably, this behavior was more prominent in older trees, which, according to the study, may have gained such impressive anticipatory abilities by growing accustomed to eclipse patterns over their long lifespan. After the older trees braced themselves for the eclipse, the rest of the trees followed suit, demonstrating an intertwined connection shared by the whole forest.

Simply put, the trees formed a community, led by their elders, to anticipate dark times, and do something about it.

And is that the entire point of this Gathering Sunday? Honoring the formation of a network that we can't see, don't quite understand, but all benefit from? Just as we threw open the doors of the parish house on Friday night, promised nothing, and trusted that everyone would get something they needed, may we throw open the doors of this church every week, trusting that we all will continue to come together, to take time from our busy lives to follow Jesus' call to love more, even when it looks, on the surface, that we're loving other aspects of our own lives less.

Friends, happy Gathering Sunday.

May we continue to gain strength as a community, drawn together by the importance of a call to justice, mercy and humility...a call that sometimes disrupts our our small circle,

and always is part of something much, much bigger.