

Blood Feuds

One could make a very strong argument that the basic unit of human life is really not the individual human being as much as it is the family, for the simple reason that no human being can survive on its own at birth and for a number of years after without the constant support and nurture provided by a family. By family I don't just mean the immediate family, either, but the extended family of grandparents, and uncles and aunts and cousins, and even close friends, what in many cultures would be thought of as a clan or a tribe. These extended ties of kinship really are the ties that bind, and they are integral to the development of every human society and central to our own personal identity, our sense of who we are.

Because these ties are so central to our sense of self, our extended families are one of the greatest of the blessings we enjoy in life, certainly one for which we should be profoundly grateful, and thank God every day. Yet—as we are reminded over and over again by the apostle Paul—it is the pernicious nature of sin to corrupt precisely those things which are our greatest blessings, in the process transforming them at times from blessing to curse. As in painfully clear in the world around us, the very family and clan ties that are among our greatest blessings are also the source of many, perhaps even most, of the conflicts that so trouble our world, from problems within our own immediate families, all the way up to wars among nations, all too many of which are—when you get right down to it—little more than blood feuds, just bigger versions of the Hatfields and McCoys.

Which is why celebrating the ethnic, cultural and regional backgrounds that are for all of us so central to our identity, and very good things entirely worthy of celebration, is at the same time quite literally playing with fire, for they are actions that may well awaken demons that had best—for everyone's sake—been left alone. I don't know what you do now with all those statues of Confederate generals and statesmen that are found all over the South, because whatever you do it's going to cause problems, and they are problems that may not go away anytime soon. Which is precisely why they should never have been put up in the first place, a point made at the time by none other than Robert E. Lee himself, who even then knew exactly what was going to happen, and in fact has.

Just how easily that kind of thing can happen, how easy it is to unleash the demons of what are pure and simply blood feuds, is a factor in all of our scripture lessons today, a factor for the simple reason that it's almost always a factor in anything that happens in any human society. It's who we are. In our Old Testament lesson this morning, the famous story of the burning bush, we hear again of the plight of the Israelites in Egypt, a place where despite having lived peaceably among the Egyptians for hundreds of years since the time of Joseph, a new pharaoh has managed to turn the populace against the Israelites by playing on the endemic human fears of the stranger in our midst. As we will see in each of these lessons, all it takes is one leader willing to play that card, whether his name is Rameses, Claudius, or Herod. All it takes is one, and you have a real problem on your hands, a place that's not going away any time soon.

In our epistle today, Paul continues trying to defuse the tensions in the church in Rome, tensions between Jew and Gentile, long-standing tensions that have been exacerbated first by Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome, and then Nero's later decision to let them return, a decision that had proved extremely unpopular. That anger had spilled over into the church, where it threatened to destroy the unity of the church, the very bond of faith that tied them together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Finally, in our gospel reading from Matthew, we see Peter instinctively reacting to the growing threats against Jesus in a way that itself threatened to undermine the gospel message, as if Jesus didn't really mean all those things he said in the Sermon on the Mount about turning the other cheek. What we don't see as clearly, at least not here, is how much of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities went back to the simple fact that he and his disciples were Galileans, while the authorities were for the most part Judeans, with tensions between those two groups going all the way back to the origins of the Kingdom of Israel a thousand years before, if not even farther. Because try as you might, that stuff just never goes away.

That's the point. That stuff never goes away, because it's literally in our blood. I don't care how small and seemingly homogeneous a group, there's always someone who can be made out to be the stranger in our midst, the one who's not really one of us, and therefore someone on whom we can blame everything. It's a temptation that's always there, from very early on in life, and if you don't believe me, just go to a playground sometime and watch children playing, and see how quickly the group can turn against someone. It's who we are, and as much as anything else, it is *the* original sin, which is why overcoming it, why rising above the temptation to indulge in such feuds, why refusing to see the world in those terms, takes everything we've got and then some.

In fact, I would go so far as to say, that these inclinations are so deeply ingrained within us, that there is only one thing that can overcome them for us, and that is the cross on which Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was put to death, a graphic and enduring reminder for us of just where our blood feuds lead. Coming to that knowledge in the face of the cross, accepting that reality about human society, that judgment, is the only thing that can stop us in our tracks and cause us to look for a better way.

That's what Jesus is telling us here, when he says that "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." *Deny* themselves. We've heard those words over and over again, but what do they mean? What does it mean to "deny yourself?" I think it means to stop thinking of ourselves in all those ways that set us over against others, all those ways that make us think we're not only different from other people, we're better than other people. All those ways we're used to thinking of ourselves.

It means, in my case for example, to stop thinking of myself first and foremost as white, as opposed to black or any other race, to stop thinking of myself as a Southerner, as opposed to people from any other part of this country, or for that matter, to stop thinking of myself above all else as an American, as opposed to those from another country. It means to stop thinking of myself, and to stop defining myself, in terms of where I went to school, as opposed to where you went to school. To stop thinking of myself as a Democrat, as opposed to a Republican, or as a

Republican as opposed to a Democrat. Even to stop thinking of myself as a Christian, if I mean by that something that sets me apart from others of God's children. In short, it means to *deny* myself, to take up the cross of Jesus Christ, and to follow him, a child of God and nothing more.

What would that look like? What would it mean to try to live like that? Well, that's exactly what Paul is describing in our epistle today, these verses from Romans that every single one of us should memorize, and then recite to ourselves every morning before we get out of bed. Because if we lived like this, we really and truly could call ourselves followers of Jesus. Hear again what Paul says: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. And if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That says it all.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*