

First of all, I want to applaud all of you for making church a priority on this holiday weekend,

and for choosing to come here, and be with your church family when I am sure any number of other things could have drawn you elsewhere.

Second of all, I just want to acknowledge that the passage we heard has some parts that are hard to stomach, some parts that are uncharacteristic of the Jesus we know and love.

It's hard to hear him say that we should hate our families.

So don't worry, for you chosen folks who came today, I am not going to spend the next 10 minutes berating you about the high cost of discipleship and how none of us are doing enough to carry our cross and that we should hate our families.

Instead, we'll talk about what Jesus probably actually meant by those verses about hating one's family members, and hating life itself.

And yea, we will discuss the high cost of discipleship, the high commitment, but also the high reward.

I know, the terms "high cost" and "high commitment" are scary, they make our red flags go up.

We're already so busy, no more high commitments for me, please.

But the truth is that as Christians, a lot is asked of us.

It is a high calling, and in this era of over-stimulation and busy schedules, our tendency is to make church easier, more convenient, less demanding.

We tell ourselves we can sneak our faith into our busy schedules, with no extra time or effort!

In fact, one of the websites I was looking at as I was doing research for my sermon had an advertisement on the side of the webpage, and it said, “No time to pray with your family? No problem! There’s an app for that!”

And it was an app presumably to make prayer faster and easier for people.

We who love the church and want people to be part of it with us, the temptation is to be accommodating, to lower the barrier to entry.

But that’s not what Jesus did. Not at all.

He was headed to Jerusalem, he was being followed by large crowds, and he told them all that in order to follow him, they had to hate their families, take up their crosses, oh, and by the way, give up all their possessions.

The UCC puts out stewardship materials every year to help churches with their annual pledge campaigns, and I have a hunch that these scriptures will never be part of any of their annual themes.

That's not how you draw people into church, not how you ask them to support it!

We'll scare them away.

But this is what Jesus said, so why did he say it?

Because he was looking for quality, not quantity.

He wasn't looking for people to help finance his church or to fill the pews, he was looking for the few people who were willing to commit their lives to turning the world upside down, and to give it everything they had.

The first way you do this is by recognizing your priorities, and hopefully God is at the top of the list.

This means, not work, nor family, nor friends, nor hobbies, should be placed above your devotion to your faith and God.

I admit, this is a hard pill to swallow.

But this is what Jesus means when he says you should 'hate' your father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters and even life itself.

We have to have a little translation discussion to understand that Jesus probably didn't mean 'hate' in the way we understand the word.

In the Bible, there's actually a tendency to use the word 'hate' as a secondary form of love.

For example, in the Old Testament, it says that a man who has two wives must love one and hate the other.

It doesn't mean he should have visceral hatred towards her but that the first wife should be preferred to the second one.

Or, if you're not so comfortable with that example, in the book of Malachi in the Old Testament, God says, "Jacob I have loved, Esau have I hated" (1:3).

It means that God preferred Jacob over Esau and so therefore Esau received a love that was less intense.

Other scholars think that it might have been hyperbole; Jesus was simply emphasizing the seriousness of taking the journey with him to Jerusalem.

But either way, Jesus isn't telling us to hate our families in the way that we understand the word hate, but rather that we shouldn't prioritize our personal relationships over our relationship with God.

This was probably as hard for those first century Jews to hear as it is for us today.

At that time, family was central.

It was your literal lifeline, connection to community, resources, it was your livelihood.

So, for a family to lose one of its members due to religious interests could have had serious detrimental effects on the family unit, and yet this is what Jesus asks of this large crowd.

This is also possibly why most of his disciples were unmarried and why most of the women who approached him were single, because those who were married couldn't afford to leave behind their families and follow him.

Jesus wanted highly devoted people who were going to put the love of all, above the love of a few.

During his ministry, Jesus modeled radical love of all people.

He didn't reserve his sermons or his quality time or his healings for a select few, all were welcome to be in ministry with him.

He showed extravagant love to everyone, that's not to say he didn't chastise anyone, but he still loved all people.

He didn't prioritize his family, restricting God's love to only those he knew and liked, and he tells us to resist limiting our affections to only those we know and like.

This is part of the high cost of discipleship, it's difficult not only to show love to everyone, meaning all people, but it's also a challenge to know what kind of love to offer people.

This stuff is hard work.

But you know what's easy? Keeping people out.

The path of least resistance is creating labels and categories and divisions and walls and being exclusive.

Knowing who is in and who is out, who you have to love and who you can ignore or who to hate, that's what society tells us to do, and it's easy.

It's clear-cut, our familial and social relationships are clearly defined and we know whom we have to show love to and whom we have to care for.

But committing our lives to loving everyone?

This is when the commitment-phobic people who want faith and religion to be easy and convenient, they start to get squeamish.

There are too many people in my tribe alone; I don't have time to care for everyone in my community, and my country and the world.

That's too many, there are other people out there who can care for those other people.

I need to take care of me and my own.

Nope.

This isn't radical discipleship, this is putting personal relationships above love of God.

Jesus calls us to expand the circle wider and wider and wider, to continuously add chairs to the table until there's room for everyone.

And for those people we don't like?

Rather than shutting down, he calls us to lean into those people we disagree with, sit right next to them at the table.

The truth is that we make sacrifices for those things that are important to us, and Jesus is calling us make the sacrifice of not giving preferential treatment to those we know and like.

He says that creating the Kingdom of God on earth needs to not be *a* priority, but *the* priority in our lives, and this means loving everyone.

It's worth mentioning that Jesus shared these words as he was traveling on the road to Jerusalem, and he probably had some sense of the risks and dangers that awaited him.

He had planned and weighed the costs, which is where the parables of the builder and the king come into the picture.

If you begin a building project, you must first calculate the cost to make sure you have enough money to complete it.

Or, if you are a king, you must calculate the strength of your enemy before going into war to see if you could win a battle.

Before setting out on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus evaluated what lay ahead of him, and then made the decision to follow that path, and he's asking his followers to do the same thing.

He doesn't want them to haphazardly hitch their wagons to his without knowing the high cost of the journey.

He only wants followers who know what they are getting themselves into.

All these years later, although the church has tried to water down the commitment, and make it easier to be a Christian, the high calling is still there, whether we choose to accept it or not.

Now at this point you might be wondering to yourself how the church will ever survive or why anyone would want to be part of an organization that asks so much of them, and it's because yes, there's a high cost but also a high reward to discipleship.

When we are authentically living our lives in alignment with our faith and our beliefs and our understanding of the Gospel message, it's a beautiful feeling.

When you extend extravagant love or care to someone who seemingly doesn't deserve it, or someone you don't know, or when you love someone so radically they wonder why, the feeling is incomparable.

Nothing feels as good as loving the other, it might be hard work, but transforming the world isn't easy, and yet that's what we are called to do.

So, on this Labor Day weekend, when we have time to reflect upon our labors, may you think about how committed you are living out the Gospel message of radical love.

Jesus doesn't want a sliver of who we are, while the rest of us is committed to 100 other things.

Jesus asks for our whole selves.

Are you all in? Amen.