

The Cult of Family

Posted on 31/03/2015

By: Al Tizon

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14: 26).



Did Jesus really say this? Say it's not true! Was he just peeved at his family when he said it, or did he really call us to hate our parents, spouses, children, and even ourselves as a general life rule? We can try to dismiss it as an isolated case, but here's another one. When Jesus' family sought to save him from embarrassment, they interrupted his sermon and called for him via a messenger: "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you"—to which he responded:

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35).

Take these verses as 30-second sound bites on a YouTube clip, and you can make a case that Jesus was anti-family. I don't think he was, but what do we make of these seemingly harsh words? I take it to mean that there is something more important than family—namely, God and God's purposes. Not that we have to choose between God and family! But I'm convinced by Jesus' teaching here that family has to be part of a larger vision.

Early on in our marriage, Janice and I intentionally chose God's mission as the principal driver for our lives; among other things, this resulted in resigning from our jobs and preparing, in our case, to move to the Philippines to work among and with the poor. As we did so, we often heard from well-meaning family and friends: "Why don't you just go for a couple of weeks and come home? No need to go overboard with this mission thing."

Some came at us a little more forcefully with words like, "Are you nuts? Don't quit your jobs. What about your future?" And with the birth of each of our four children, these kinds of sentiments only intensified. I still remember receiving a stern letter from one of our supporters shortly after the birth of our third child, reprimanding us for contemplating relocating to Vietnam (from the Philippines) to work with the persecuted church.

I hope our responses to these sincere folks were kind and humble but also clear that our commitment to God's call to serve the poor for the sake of the gospel compels us. Now, I realize how revoltingly super-spiritual that could sound; but as followers of Jesus, are we not at least to attempt to live out the radical demands of the gospel in the world?

Could this idea of following Jesus as being more important than "...father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes even life itself..." be what Jesus was driving at here? Could the call to "hate" basically be saying that the family, at best, should be a distant second compared to genuine discipleship? If so, then to cease pursuing the radical ideals of the kingdom because we got married or because we have children, to make the family the new center of one's universe, is to

participate in the cult of family, i.e., when our marriages and our children—or when the hope for these things, if you're single—eclipse the desire to be Christ's faithful disciple in the world.

I am keenly aware of the other side of the coin: pastors and missionaries who neglect their marriages and their children for the sake of ministry. The list of dedicated Christians who were absentee spouses/parents is way too long. And I applaud groups such as Focus on the Family for their courageous affirmation of the family as part of what it means to be a healthy church as well as a healthy nation. This is actually one of the places where Focus on the Family types and ESA types have stood together. But I wonder if an unforeseen side effect of the Christian pro-family movement has been the elevation of the family to that high place reserved for God and only God. There is a profound difference between upholding the family and participating in the cult of family. Jesus taught that we need to avoid the latter if we want to be disciples.

Janice and I have certainly had our share of marital spats, and we have certainly made blunders as parents. But one thing that we are thankful for in retrospect is our agreed-upon resolve not to change our missionary course even as our family grew in complexity and in numbers. Our children simply joined in the work as they came with us to the slums of Manila; they joined us in handing out emergency relief goods in those rural places devastated by disaster; they joined us in loving, befriending, bandaging, and serving street kids at the clinic in Olongapo City; they learned how to be hospitable as we opened our doors to the poor and outsiders came to live with us. They grew up knowing that our little family was not the center of the universe, that purpose and meaning in life have something to do with submitting to a greater force, a greater Personality, at play in the world. At least, this has been our hope; the first therapy session of any of our kids would be telling, I suppose!

As I look back, this way of being family has worked for us. In fact, I'll even say that it has deepened our love for each another. Janice and I recently celebrated our 33rd anniversary, and our years together as partners in life and ministry have been exceedingly fulfilling, as we've experienced both joy and pain, laughter and tears, rewards and challenges, 'til death do us part. We have four incredible children—Candace, Christian, Corazon, and Zoey—who are walking out their own respective faith journeys. Our oldest daughter, Candace, and her husband, Edwin, have made us grandparents, three times over! Yes, life would feel very thin without the rich, invaluable experience of family.

But the moment I become over-possessive of them and lose sight of the prize, the words of a Keith Green song come to mind that goes, "I pledge my wife, I pledge my [kids], I pledge my head to heaven for the gospel."

May this be the mantra of a people who love their families with all of their beings—but who love their Lord and Savior more.