

Sermon for 27 June 2010
Pentecost 5; Proper 8, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

One sign of a good work of fiction (at least as far as I'm concerned) is that it leaves us with questions, not condescending to answer them all for us, but simply laying the problem out in front of us. A few years ago, my favorite filmmaker, Wes Anderson, released a movie called *The Darjeeling Limited* which succeeded in this regard. The film is about three brothers who had been estranged since the death of their father a year before the action in the film. They decide to rekindle their fraternal relationships by taking a train ride through Northern India. The brother who instigated the reunion, however, has a secret plan. He had found out that their mother had surreptitiously become a nun after the death of her husband, and she had gone to live at a convent in the mountainous Darjeeling region of India.

After much conflict and the discovery of a letter from their mother urging them not to visit, the brothers decide to make for the convent anyway. Upon finally finding her, the brothers have an awkward reunion with the nun, ably played by Anjelica Huston. She claims to need separation from her family to do the Lord's work, and despite a moving conversation before bed time, after which the love and remorse of all the characters is "laid on the table" as it were, she nonetheless disappears before the boys wake up the next morning, presumably to carry on her evangelistic work in the wilderness. In all events, the audience is left to assume that she would never be seen by her sons again.

It's hard to know how the audience is supposed to react to Huston's character. Her choices seem at least superficially principled, but there appears to be more than a little selfishness and avoidance in them. One wonders if her supposed faith and her

church work are a clever way of escaping her family commitments or if she's simply deluded or if the audience is supposed to feel guilty for not trusting that the character really is acting virtuously. How could one leave one's family to do God's work? Then again, how could one not? Would God really ask us to make such a sacrifice, a sacrifice which not only affects us but those closest to us?

The questions which the film brings up are also front-and-center in this morning's Gospel. Jesus says some pretty disquieting things in the Gospels, but what we read today might strike us as the most offensive thing in the bible. A man who wishes to become a disciple asks "Lord, let me first go and bury my father [and then I will follow]." And how does Jesus respond? "Leave the dead to bury their own dead." Another wishes only to say goodbye to his family before setting out, and Jesus responds "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks

back is fit for the Kingdom of God." Jesus seems to be contradicting even his own prophetic heritage—you'll remember from the Old Testament lesson that Elijah permitted Elisha to literally "put his hand to the plow and look back", to take his oxen back home and say goodbye to his own family before following the prophet.

How do we deal with this hard teaching of Jesus? I don't know entirely, and I'm starting to wish that I'd chosen to preach on the Epistle! Jesus' words in today's Gospel are shocking. This is the Jesus whom so many equate with "family values", whatever people who use that phrase mean by it, and Jesus' words seem diametrically opposed to those values.

I think we do violence to Jesus' teaching if we opt to spiritualize it entirely. That's a trick we've probably seen before in another context. Often a preacher, when given Jesus' teaching about money (namely, his command to give it all away),

will turn the whole thing into a spiritual exercise, saying "well, you don't have to give all your money away, just don't place all your trust in the wealth you have. Be ready to lose it if it comes to that." Of course, the meaning of Jesus' teaching in that matter is complex, but there's something more to it than how we're supposed to feel about money. We are supposed to *do something*.

It's much the same with regard to Jesus' teaching about family. He's not just saying, "be ready to lose your loved ones in the normal course of events (as they die or move away or whatever) without losing your faith." It's not an entirely spiritual teaching, even if we wish it were, because the spiritual meaning is so much more comfortable than a meaning with any practical implications.

But, then again, we can't come to terms with an entirely literal reading of the teaching either. There is a chance that Jesus meant exactly what he

literally said, but that would go against the expectation of the rest of scripture and of the Church's historical teaching, namely that commitment to one's family is not only "okay", but is enjoined on us as a holy obligation.

So, it seems to me, there is something more complex in Jesus' words than either the simple literal meaning or the entirely spiritualized meaning.

Perhaps, and this is just a hunch (albeit a hunch with some theological training backing it up), perhaps Jesus is warning his interlocutors and all of us, his prospective disciples today, against making excuses. Specifically, he may be warning us against making our commitments to family an excuse for not doing his work.

Now, before I seem to say something too scandalous, let me explain what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that there aren't family obligations which effect how we approach our own ministry in

the church. I'm not saying that missing a Sunday from time to time to be with a sick parent is going to get us in trouble. I'm not saying that becoming a little less active in some role or another because you've got young children or teenagers is wrong. I'm not saying that family commitments shouldn't figure in to how we determine what our own ministries in the church or in the world should look like. To go back to that movie I was talking about earlier, going covertly to be a missionary in India right when there are grieving sons back in America who need love and support is probably not the way to do God's work properly. Quite to the contrary, family obligations are obligations given to us from God, and fulfilling those obligations is an important way to do God's work.

What I do think we learn from reflection on the Gospel, though, is that sometimes misunderstanding the nature of those obligations can keep us from doing that to which we are called. In other words,

we can convince ourselves that there is a barrier which doesn't exist between our desire to serve and our ability. For example, I heard a number of anecdotes when I was in seminary from some of my older classmates. They had felt a call to the priesthood for years, but believed it to be absolutely unfeasible because of their children's need for stability. So, many waited until all the kids were out of the house and in college fifteen or twenty years later and then realized that they could have moved earlier, the kids could have been in a good school and had friends and probably would have loved going to seminary with mom or dad.

Of course, this wouldn't be the case in every family's situation, but what I'm saying is that we've got to reflect rather than dismiss the possibility of some sort of ministry out of hand. We might find that our family obligations preclude volunteering to usher or teach Sunday School or visit the sick or whatever. Or, we might find that

we can fit it in or, better yet, involve our family (it was wonderful last week to see Andrew Milam ushering along with his dad and granddad). The point is that individual situations with regard to family or work or any other commitment will open up new avenues for ministry and close others. It's our responsibility to avoid making excuses and consider how precisely we are able to follow, what that can look like for each of us in the context of his or her own life. Scale back involvement in one area if you need to, ramp it up in others if you're able. We've just got to do the hard work of thinking about it and praying about it first. If we do that, we might be surprised what we can accomplish for the sake of the Kingdom.

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Amen.