

Matthew 16:21-28

At the recommendation of many people, some of whom are in this parish, and in an effort to see what is “out there”, Father Brad has been dating again. And it is an odd situation, I have to tell you. First, I have not dated in over seven years. As such, I have been made, again, aware that dating is at best a form of job interview and at worst a foreign language. But secondly, I have never dated as a full blown, holy spirit ordained priest, and that is a whole other factor to consider. Sometime, outside of the pulpit, I will regale you with anecdotes of failed dating efforts and its connection to my collar.

I find that I wish that I had what the Mennonites have. In this week’s *Christian Century*, there is an article about an on-line Mennonite dating service, known to insiders as Menn-o-meet, or affectionately as “Menn-o-m-e-a-t,” which is a name I will not touch. But Menn-o-meet, like J-date which functions for those of a Jewish persuasion, is a website designed specifically for fellow Mennonites to meet, greet, and potentially inter-marry. Questions for applicants on Menn-o-meet, so the article says, include the usual Hometown and personal information, but because the website is Mennonite specific, it also asks candidates to “List three food items that best represent Mennonites to you” (one can only surmise that German inspired casseroles are mentioned). The website also asks, “Describe your interpretation of the Schleithem Confession.” I can only imagine what questions would be if there were an equivalent Episco-meet. For starters, I know that there would be no reference to the Creeds. Perhaps, instead “Do you like coffee before or after church, or both, or are you one of those anglo-phile tea only sort of Episcopalians?” Or “Dip.... or drink from the Chalice?” And because it is Episcopalian, we could hope that it would not assume the gender of the people we wish to date.

When I began dating, a wise friend told me to first establish a criterion, something by which I might be able to measure the people I meet, a sort of job description. The criterion was to prevent me being swept off my feet for a potential Mr. Wrong and to also really measure whether or not a potential Mr. Right was really a Mr. Right or merely a Mr. So-so. The list was to be more than Hollywood ideals of an over the top, “you are my everything” relationship. It was about the qualities and character of a person. Who am I willing to care for? Who am I willing to allow to care for me? And I made my criterion. Potential faith, caring, intelligence, and interests were all addressed. And I realized that what I really want, bottom line is someone whom I can enjoy the joys of life with, who wants a relationship based on mutual care, and also someone who is not afraid to go through the difficulties of life.... together. Now just to find him! .

Which brings me to the readings for today. In our Gospel reading for today, we hear Jesus address his disciples, his inner circle. Peter has just proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah, and indeed the disciples are all beginning to join the Messiah-band-wagon. They are beginning to think that Jesus is Mr. Right for the salvation of the world. But the problem is, and here is the rub for the readings, the disciples seem to have a Messianic criterion that would specifically exclude who Jesus is, and despite what they think, Jesus is who they really need. The disciples seem to believe in a Messiah who will rule with a mighty hand and be able to protect them from every harm, the equivalent of a Hollywood ending in which we see the first kiss, but not the real relationship 10 years later.

Jesus, in today's reading, begs these disciples for a more realistic view of his love for them, a more realistic criterion. He says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

In other words, Jesus is telling them that this love of God, like the true loves of our lives, is not going to be about how much we receive, but about how much we give. And Jesus does not sugar-coat that in Pollyanna first kisses. Instead, he says that if we want the joys of God's love, we must endeavor to see the world through the eyes and love of God, which is to often stand at odds with a warring world. And it might hurt. In other words, Jesus is redefining their criterion for a Messiah. Jesus is a messiah who is not immune to that warring world but instead chooses to be subject to it. But at the same time, he will still forgive us, stand with us as we are subject to that world, and invite us into a new way of being.

Paul writes to the Romans, "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. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

I proclaim that these words and the words of Jesus to his disciples should be our criterion for love: love of God and love of one another. We have a God who will enjoy the joys of life with us and hold our hands and bodies in times of trial. And we invite ourselves every week in this place and out there to give ourselves and lives and love to that God and to one another in the same way. In effect, we invite ourselves to weigh our lives before this criterion, asking what parts are worth enduring, and what parts are not?

At this point in the year, the world is speeding up, and the last minutes of summer are fading. And before the world takes off again, I invite you all to look at this reading and make a criterion for your lives, to really look at what is important and what is not, to realize that many parts of our lives are not Mr. Right and need to be weeded out, that they are not worth enduring for. If it's not worth suffering for, it's not worth it. And realize that when the right thing comes along, it is worth our effort and our diligence, everything we've got, especially our love. That right thing is the bush that Moses saw, the love that does not consume and does not ember down. It is the love that Paul spoke about and the love that Jesus lived into. It is the love that he died for and rose again for. And if we have that love, the rest: This speeding up world, my dating life, or lack thereof, and all our joys and woes, will fall into place, and will continue to be molded by true love and the love of God.