

Season of Creation – Take it Seriously
September 7, 2025
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

This morning's gospel is one of those texts where I wish we got Mary, Jesus' mother's commentary on what he says

If we did, I think it would be something like "I don't like that tone young man!"

Trey Clark, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, attended a church where the preacher would say "if you can't say 'amen' let me hear you say 'ouch!'"¹

...ouch!

It is tempting to preach a sermon whose message is something like: don't worry, he didn't mean it that way!

Pay no attention to the angry Jesus over here, let's just remember the calm, peaceful Jesus okay?

Because, Lord knows, it's gonna be hard to sell this Jesus to folks

Can you imagine going to the church Christmas fair and there are all these framed cross-stitch patterns with hands in the praying position and the quote "hate your family, follow me"

Yeah, no, it might be better to stick with "consider the lilies of the field" and "love your neighbor"

Dr. Clark offers three ways to approach this text

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-luke-1425-33-6>

The first is to take the words literally

One of the greatest arguments for a literal translation of the Bible is its accessibility – because the text means what it says and says what it means, anyone can read the Bible to know what it means

Jesus meant what he said

One of the pitfalls of a literal reading of the Bible are the ways in which scripture contradicts itself or how literal interpretations of metaphor and parable fall short

In this way, interpreting this text this morning from Jesus literally contradicts his previous teachings – Jesus summed up the law by including the commandment to love your neighbors, he affirmed the law's command to love your parents

A literal reading of this text doesn't seem appropriate

The second way to read the text is to say that Jesus' words are hyperbole – this is the method I'd like to take so I'm going to just tell you the third and then come back to this one!

The third way is to know that the word "hate" here is often, otherwise, interpreted in the Hebrew Bible as "love less" than something else

Dr. Clark gives the example of how it says in Genesis that "Leah was hated" by Jacob, which scholars agree means not that he hated her as we interpret the word "hate" today - to have animosity towards someone – but rather that Jacob loved Leah *less* than he loved Rachel

This lens held over this morning's readings would infer that Jesus isn't saying we should have intense feelings of dislike towards our families, but rather Jesus is saying love them less than you love me – love them less than you love your calling to be my disciple

I'm not ready to give a sermon on this third interpretation, I need to give this one more thought, but the second lens – seeing Jesus' words as hyperbole, speaks to me

There are many moments in the gospels we can point to where Jesus uses hyperbole to get a message across

For instance, Matthew 5:29-30 “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away”

Thankfully very few scholars think that Jesus actually thought people should pluck out their eyes or cut off their hands

Rev Dr Dave Bookless, Director of Theology at A Rocha International, a global ecumenical organization dedicated to the care and conservation of the planet, compares these two hyperboles in his reflection on this morning's text: “Jesus often used hyperbole but, just as his words on plucking out your own eye if it leads you astray (Matthew 5:29-30), the meaning is not literally to hate, but to ensure family / eyes do not prevent our single-minded focus on following Jesus.”²

Jesus' hyperbole is an attention-grabbing, conscience-awakening tool – are you paying attention yet? Does Jesus have your focus?

Does Jesus have your focus?...that's the point

Does Jesus literally mean we are to hate our families and give up all our possessions if you want to be his disciple? – probably not

But do we need to pay attention and awaken our spirits – do we need to reorient ourselves and our priorities – probably so!

Dr. Bookless notes, “As we apply this passage to following Jesus in an age of ecological catastrophe, injustice and over-consumption, Jesus’ words on giving up everything we have to follow him bring our biggest challenge.”

“Today we have all the solutions we need to address the ecological challenges we face,” he says. “The problem is not the science or technology. It is us. We can blame politicians or big business, but they ultimately answer to voters and shoppers. The problem is people. We are resistant to giving up our comforts, to reducing our addiction to air travel, to new tech (phones, TVs, laptops), to keeping our homes artificially hot or cold, to eating whatever we feel like. We place convenience before conscience, and comfort before God’s Kingdom.”

another hyperbole?

Not intended to be – but, the topic of climate change and its terrifying consequences have a similar impact on us to the hyperbole of Jesus’ message

They trigger the same reptile parts of our brain that tell us to fight, flee, or freeze – the issue is too big? dismiss it!

ecological catastrophe, injustice and over-consumption? let’s just go back to admiring nature, recycling of course as we can, but let’s paint a calmer, more peaceful picture of Creation

the problem is people? that’s an exaggeration

Jesus told us to hate our families and sell our possessions? he obviously didn’t mean it!

Climate change is considered to be the greatest threat to public health in the coming decades?³ that can't actually be true

As much as I, too, have these reactions and want to turn the heat down on these topics, I can't preach that sermon – I can't preach a sermon that says' Jesus didn't mean to speak with such vigor and zeal, and I can't preach a sermon that might endorse a “do nothing/do little” response to climate change

I think we need to take Jesus' hyperbole seriously to hear the weight and importance of the message he's trying to get across: discipleship requires an orientation toward God's kingdom that can often get lost – Jesus is trying to call you back!

And, I think we need to take seriously the climate prophets and scientists who are trying to not just raise alarms, but equip us with knowledge and tools: we have the means, we just need to have the mindsets and determination.

Jesus' hyperbole this morning reminds us that discipleship is costly!

Our discipleship to God's full creation is costly.

“if you can't say 'amen' let me hear you say 'ouch!’”

And fear not, I think Dr. Clark's pastor is right that “ouch” is as faithful a response as “amen” – “ouch” expresses as deep a feeling and response to the significance of the gospel as “amen” and is an equally honest response

In this Season of Creation, we're going to have moments of “ouch” and “amen” – because discipleship is costly

Can I get an ouch?

³ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10037158/>

Amen.