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Pentecost 6 – Matthew 10:34-42 – Our Savior’s Sword is Sharp

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They say blood is thicker than water. Family ties run deep. There’s nothing in this world that matters more than bloodline, and those relationships are closer and more important than any others – not friendship, not business, sometimes not even marriage, none.

That’s what they say – that nothing in this world can cut those blood-red bonds. But anybody who says that apparently has never read our Gospel lesson for today, because here Jesus tells us that the sword he brings is sharp enough to sever even our closest relationships with the people around us if that’s what it comes to. Now Jesus isn’t saying that that’s the way it has to be; in fact, what Jesus is talking about here today is really more of a last resort than a primary goal. But this is a reality that Christian people need to come to terms with, he says, because we need to know that there’s nothing more important in this world than our relationship with Jesus Christ. Our Savior’s sword is sharp – so sharp in fact that he cuts away from us anything that would get in the way of our faith – anything! – and he frees us from anything that would drag us down and keep us from life to the fullest in faith and service to him.

But how unthinkable were the words of Jesus to his disciples here! He was the Prince of Peace, wasn’t he? He came to bring peace on earth, preached a Gospel of peace, and one of his favorite greetings was, “Peace be with you!” So how could Jesus possibly say something like this? *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* Whether they knew him as their Savior who came to bring spiritual peace to his people or whether they thought of him as a political Messiah who was supposed to bring physical peace to Israel, either way what Jesus said to his disciples must’ve been shocking. Here Jesus was really calling his disciples to do faithful mission work to the world, but it seems like all he does is talk about how much damage and chaos his Word is going to cause.

In fact, he even says that the sword he brings – the conflict his teaching is going to cause – is going to be so serious that it could even divide your household straight down the middle. That was no easy pill to swallow for an Israelite. See, people in those Eastern cultures were fiercely loyal to their families, and typically they would rather die than do anything to bring shame or trouble on their loved ones. Nothing got in the way of their family allegiances, and if ever it was true, it was true for an Israelite that blood is

thicker than water. So what an offense it must’ve been when Jesus told them, *“I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’”*

I mean, that just wasn’t done. You didn’t mess with somebody’s family; that was off limits. But then, as if it were even possible, Jesus went further and blew the minds of his followers that much more: *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”* Yes, Jesus said, I’m making you choose, if that’s what it comes to. If you’re going to represent me to this world, if you’re going to reflect me in this world, you have to be all in. I have to be #1 in your heart and soul and mind, more so than your parents, more so than your children, more so than anything that’s near and dear to you, and I have to mean so much to you that you should be willing to suffer for my name, and not just suffer any old thing, but even to suffer the worst of punishments known to mankind, to take up your cross and die next to me for the sake of faithfulness to me. Your things, your reputation, your comforts, your career, your friends and family, every last thing you have here in this life I want you to be willing to sacrifice for my sake.

That’s not the kind of thing we’re used to hearing from Jesus, is it? That’s kind of in-your-face, intimidating stuff. Honestly, the Lord has never asked me to give much of that up for his name’s sake, so I don’t know what it’s like, but I know I don’t like the sounds of it – and I’m guessing you probably have that same feeling. I love my family. I cherish my friends. I enjoy the comforts of home and the amenities I’ve been blessed with. I don’t want to have to give them up... but Jesus says we should be willing to, for him. So could you? The family you love, the home you’ve built, the life you’ve lived, are you willing to throw it all away for Jesus’ sake? Because make no mistake about it, the sword Jesus brings has before and will again force that issue for God’s people – maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, maybe never even in your lifetime here in this country. But maybe it will, and Jesus wants you to be ready.

Now we need to understand what Jesus is really telling us here so we don’t jump to wrong conclusions. He’s not telling us not to love our parents or children. Far from it. And he’s not telling us that we should hop on a plane right now and seek out persecution and martyrdom. Again, far from it. God wants us to value our families and our lives as some of our highest, most precious gifts from him. But understand that the gift is never as important as the giver, and that’s what Jesus wants us to know here. You may love your

family and your life, and that's good; but don't love them more than you love your gracious God, who blessed you with them. If your family means everything to you in life but coming to church and caring for your spiritual life is really more of an afterthought – maybe you spend more time in sports or camping or car shows or sleeping in – then listen to what Jesus says here, because this alarm he sounds is for you. Understand that the best thing you can do for yourself and for your family is to be faithful to Christ and to bring them to God's house to gather around his Word and Sacraments so they can have a solid relationship with their Savior as well. There's nothing that unites a family more and shows better mutual love and care than sharing with each other the most precious thing you have, and that's your hope for eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. So put Christ first in your life and in your family, and let your Savior's sharp sword cut away anything else that would challenge him.

But here in the real world, what happens when it doesn't work out perfectly, like it's supposed to? What happens when your family drifts away from Christ or you get singled out for being faithful to Christ when nobody else wants to? Or what happens when your Christianity makes you the butt of jokes and the focus of all kinds of backlash when your beliefs go against the grain of society's? What happens when your friends and your reputation and your feelings go out the door or your career gets sidetracked because your Christianity all of the sudden makes you a hateful, backward bigot? Well, Jesus warned us ahead of time that this was coming, and this is the kind of effect our Christian faith is going to have on the world around us – it's going to bring a sword, and that sword's sharpness is going to hurt sometimes.

So what do you do in those situations? First of all, you pray. Pray for faith, pray for strength and comfort, pray that Jesus would keep you close to him through it all, because that's your top priority. He needs to stay #1 in your life, or else all is lost. Then pray also for those around you. Pray for those people who hate you so that maybe one day they'll see the true love and purpose that Jesus Christ gives your life. Pray for your family members so that maybe one day they'll come to a better relationship with Jesus and your family can have the kind of special unity based not just on your blood but on your Savior's blood that God always meant for us to have. Loving Jesus more than your family doesn't mean that you have to stop loving them. Keep loving them; they need it! And the best way you can love them is by not giving up on them. Show them you care, show them you want to be a part of their lives and *vice versa*, and ultimately show them your faith that changes your life and your whole purpose and hope for your existence, because if nothing else, your confidence and perseverance just might be the foot in the

door to getting through to them. Then finally, when this world hates you and labels you and attacks you for your faithfulness to Christ, that's when you need Jesus all the more in worship and Bible study and personal devotions at home, because that's how you strengthen the foundation of your life against anything that threatens it and that's how you find encouragement and support from your fellow Christians for everything you're going through together.

And then rejoice – yes, rejoice that you're going through those things! Now that doesn't necessarily mean that you have to enjoy whatever persecutions you may face, but rejoice that you've been counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ, because that tells you that while you may be in this world, you are not of this world. You are a child of God and you have an eternal reward waiting for you in heaven one day. It's just like Jesus said, *“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.”* Jesus doesn't want us to chase after what's important to this world like so many people do, because then you lose sight of what's really most important for your spiritual life. Instead he wants us to keep our focus on him and our heavenly inheritance that he's preparing for us right now, because when we do that, Jesus keeps that #1 spot in our lives and everything else becomes secondary. We can love our family, our friends, our things, everything the Lord has blessed us with here, but if we have to give them all up for Jesus, our Christian faith makes that okay. We still have what's most important in our lives and what means everything for us, because we have our Savior and our heavenly Father at our back, holding us in their hands and waiting for us in heaven with open arms, and the crown they're going to give to us there is going to be so much greater than anything we might ever lose here.

But still they say blood is thicker than water, don't they? Well yes, and actually we can say that, too – but make sure you know whose blood you're talking about, because there's no closer relationship in all of creation than the one that our Savior made with us when he poured out his blood for us on the cross. That makes us not part of an earthly family right now, but part of God's heavenly family forever – a blessing that we celebrate specially in Holy Baptism! Jesus' blood means more to us than anything this world could ever give us, because it means forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life with him. Even the things that are nearest and dearest to us in this world are nothing to us compared to the treasure we have in Christ. Yes, our Savior's sword is sharp, and it might hurt sometimes. But it's sharp like a surgeon's scalpel – sharp to cut away anything that could hurt you and your spiritual life, sharp to free you for lives of true faith and service, and sharp to set you apart from this sin-mired world for himself and for the perfect peace and joy of paradise. Amen.