

Follow Me

Sermon 16 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 12, 2019

Exodus 18: 13-23 & John 21: 9-19

I've been watching *Game of Thrones* lately. Beneath the battle scenes and harsh medieval realities of the show, there is a story about identity, loyalty, and family. There are seven kingdoms living in the united realm and nine prominent families ruling over different parts of the realm. Each family has a sigil and a phrase that summarizes their identity. For example, The House Tully's sigil is the fish and their words are, "Family. Duty. Honor." House Lannister is the Lion and their words, "Hear Me Roar." After the death of King Robert, early in season 1 the Lords (and Lady's) of the nine different houses begin warring over the throne. As battles forge on, families are separated and people are left untethered from their homes and relatives. In those states of isolation, individuals are forced to choose companions outside of their historical allegiances. The question for each unfortunate character in this circumstance becomes, "Who can I trust?"

There's a scene early on in which a child, Aryia of House Stark is studying the families, sigils, and words. She grows frustrated as she struggles to memorize and respond correctly to her teacher. "Aryia, who is the House Targaryen and what are their words?" Those lessons will prove helpful later on in the series.

As the drama unfolds, viewers (like me) watch to see who will be true to the family values and who will betray their familial identity.

Watching the show, I cannot help but think about my own family heritage. My parents and grandparents have certainly instilled within me certain family values and traditions. Ways of living that shape my core identity and make me who I am. So, as I watch *Game of Thrones*, I wonder what my family sigil might be or what phrase might be used to describe our "house". I come from the house Tatum which values the Christian faith, hard work, and hospitality. These values are not the only ones, but they are definitely primary. From the day of my birth I have been shaped by the practices of faith by attending church regularly, saying prayers at night, reading the Bible, and talking openly about my relationship with Jesus. Additionally, I've observed my parents working tirelessly at their jobs. There was never a day (even on vacation) when mom didn't respond to a church need or dad take a work call. The Tatum's are a hard-working lot. Even with all of this, the value that most shaped my childhood and continues to inform who I am today is that of hospitality. I remember my mother feeling more than her share of Baptist guilt over the size of our house. Although it was nothing extravagant, mom always felt like since we had an extra room, it would be her "God" room. Over the years I have seen my mother welcome Bosnian refugees, Belarussian teenagers, and numerous friends of mine and my sisters in need of a temporary place to stay. Her pantry is always stocked with enough food to feed anyone who may drop in unannounced. And her time is always available if someone needs a listening ear, a friendly hug, or a shoulder to cry on.

Faith, Work, and Hospitality. Those are the Tatum family words.

This morning we meet the disciples on the shore of Tiberias where they have gone back to what they know best: fishing. The skills that Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John, and the others displayed at sea were probably instilled upon them by their fathers as they grew up. Fishing was a valuable skill and a family trade just like most ancient vocations. It brought in a meager income and could provide modestly for a family. It wouldn't be surprising at all to meet the disciples at sea if this chapter was found earlier in the Gospel, next to the other stories of Jesus' first calling of the disciples. There, it would make sense for this lot to be gone fishing. But we are in the 21st chapter now. We've read and seen how these fishermen left their nets behind and began "fishing for people" as the Gospels say. They already made the decision to abandon the family vocations of commercial fishing to take on the work of Jesus: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

In fact, as we read John's Gospel, these words begin to sound like the "House Words" of the prominent families in *Game of Thrones*. Maybe the house of Jesus begins to take them on as an identifying refrain. Who is the House of Jesus and what are their words? "Feeding the Hungry. Healing the Sick. Raising the Dead." We may hear little Arya Stark say as she recites her lessons. Throughout this Gospel, Jesus has been traveling throughout Galilee welcoming men and women, rich and poor, broken and whole with the simple phrase, "Follow Me."

And many have. So it's strange to see those followers, the ones who had given up their family trade and to be adopted into Jesus' family, to find them once again at sea. Wait a minute, we might think. I thought they were in the House of Jesus now?

As the story unfolds, it seems Jesus, too, is surprised that the disciples have failed to remain loyal in his absence. "Do you love me?" He asks Peter. "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Peter replies. "Feed my sheep," Jesus responds.

A second time, Jesus asks, "Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, You know that I love you."

"Tend my lambs"

And a third time Jesus asks, as if Peter's words of love and friendship hadn't meant a thing, "Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

The third time Jesus' verb changes in the Greek. What begins as a question about the most serious kind of love, agape, is reduced to philos the last time Jesus asks the question.

Almost as if Jesus is saying, “Ok, maybe agape is asking too much... do you even want to be my friend, Peter?”

Peter’s response uses agape all three times, but Jesus is looking for more than words from his disciple.

Over the years the word discipleship has been used to describe Christian Education, Faith Formation, and Bible Study. When we hear this common “church word” many of us imagine a process of learning that happens inside our churches or in small groups. Discipleship, unfortunately, has become an intellectual exercise made up of words and ideas. It is an exercise in abstract thoughts about love and salvation, sin and righteousness, piety and doctrine.

One of my colleagues told a story to a room full of clergy in Charlotte about a time he was working on racial reconciliation in the city. He was head to head with a local activist who insisted that he, a clergyman with a PhD had no business getting involved with their activism. “Why are you here?,” she said. “Because I want the same things you want.” He responded. “If that’s the case, and if you were any good at your job, none of us would have to be out here right now.” She retorted.

She was right. He knew it, I knew it, we all knew it. This was one of the most churchied cities in the country and yet here we all were, trying to figure out how to create equal housing and education opportunities, trying to understand how the burdens of race and class seemed to always come together, and trying to create an environment in which all people had opportunities – real opportunities – to grow and become the people God had created them to be.

I know Raleigh isn’t Charlotte, but it also isn’t all that different. We still labor under the same laws, we still can’t control gentrification in the downtown areas which displaces the poor, we still struggle to keep our schools and neighborhoods integrated, we still don’t know how to help the generationally impoverished...

No two cities are the same but the words of the activist haunt me each day as I get up in my comfortable home and come to work in this comfortable place. “If you were any good at your job, none of us would have to be out here right now.”

Maybe too many pastors and church members and followers of Jesus have given up and gone back to fishing. Maybe we have continued to say with our mouths, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” and yet forgotten to say it with our lives by feeding sheep and tending the flock.

Maybe we have taken back or given names and returned the title “House of Jesus” because living into that mantra, “Feeding the hungry, Healing the Sick, Raising the Dead” just isn’t working for us anymore. Maybe it’s too hard. Maybe we have looked around

and seen how much work needs to be done and maybe we have decided that the task is too heavy.

Reminds me of Moses in the wilderness. He's led the people out of captivity and into the wilderness where they await arrival to the promised land. He's prayed for God's deliverance and guidance. He has mediated the laws of Yahweh to the Hebrew people and now, on top of everything else, they all come to him with every dispute. Although Moses cannot see it yet, his father in law Jethro does. Jethro tells him, "Moses, what you are doing is not good... the task is too heavy for you to do it alone."

So Moses looks around and sees others who can help, so he invites them along to share in the work. The task isn't so heavy when others join in the work.

Sounds a lot like Jesus saying to the disciples on the shore that day, follow me. Follow me and be a disciple, Peter. Stop saying you love me and start acting like it! Feed my sheep, tend my flock! This is what it means to be a disciple, to love Jesus *is* to share in his work.

The prominent families in *Game of Thrones* are so interesting to follow from season to season because each individual character (it seems) will have to make a critical choice between self-preservation and family. They'll have to choose between surviving the moment or dying with integrity and honor, knowing that their actions define their name. Their actions either bring honor to the family and strengthen the family name or they forever damage the reputations that were built generation by generation.

According to John's Gospel, those who follow Jesus are adopted into the family. They're called sisters and brothers in Christ. Siblings of one house, the House of Jesus. Gifted with the same promise and tasked with the work of feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead. It is a huge and overwhelming calling, to respond "yes" to that invitation, follow me. But unlike Moses who labored alone for all that time, we do not work alone.

In *Game of Thrones* everyone knows you don't go anywhere alone. There are too many voices on the path trying to figure out who your people are, what you stand for, and whether or not you can be swayed. But when the families stick together, and share in their work, they become stronger and their influence grows. It grows because the strong families are more than just their sigils and words written down or spoke. They are strong because they have become their words by living them with their lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "The call (to Discipleship) goes forth, and is at once followed by the response of obedience. The response of the disciples is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith..."¹

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*. 57.
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So when Jesus comes calling with that invitation to discipleship, it won't be a call to repeat the words or to completely understand doctrine, it will simply sound like, "Follow Me."

And whether it is the first time or one of many times the call rings out to you and to us... the response is more than words on our lips. It must be lived with our lives.

Do you love me?
Feed my sheep.

Do you *love* me?
Tend my flock.

Do you love me?

... Follow me.