

Happy Father's Day  
Matthew 10:34-39  
June 19, 2005

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I came to set sons against their fathers ... your worst enemies will be the members of your own family ... those who love their father more than me are not fit to be my disciples.*

And, oh, by the way ... happy Father's Day!

OK. I know what you are thinking!

*Tim, how could you? How could you choose a text like this one to read for Father's Day? Do you have any discretion, any common sense?*

But I didn't choose the text. It's the gospel reading designated by the *Revised Common Lectionary* for this week!

*But, Tim, you don't always use the lectionary texts for your sermons. In fact, you've hardly followed the lectionary at all the last several years! So why today of all Sundays do you decide to use the lectionary gospel? It's Father's Day, and not only that, today two new parents have brought their first child to be baptized! Are these the words you want Todd and Diana to remember from this most special day: "Those who love their father or mother more than me are not fit to be my disciples; those who love their son or daughter more than me are not fit to be my disciples?" Is this the message you want Todd and Diana to take with them from this day of baptism?*

As a matter of fact ... yes!

Todd, I do wish you a happy Father's Day. This is indeed a special Father's Day for you. It is your first in your new role as a father. From all that I have seen, you are handling this new role well, with dedication and with a sincere love both for your son and his mother. You do your part. You are an involved dad.

This morning is a case in point. On the day you and Diana have brought your son to be baptized, you didn't simply show up, you didn't simply play along, standing here and repeating empty promises. You chose to be baptized, too! You chose to join your son in receiving the sign of God's grace and love on your forehead! Good for you!

What a wonderful gift you have given your son today. But if your baptism is done only for Aidan's sake, the gift will mean little to him. The greatest gift you can give your son is not to love him best of all, but to love Jesus best of all! When you love Jesus and when you let Jesus love you, you become whole, you become well, you are filled with the gifts Jesus gives you -- love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and humility and self-control. And then, you will have much to give your son! Being a father is a high and sacred calling. But your highest and most sacred calling is not to be a father, but to be a child ... God's child.

OK, Tim ... I understand. When we love Jesus most of all, we are really loving each other, too. The best thing we can do for those we love is to take good care of ourselves so we will have something of value to give them. But why would Jesus say: *Your worst enemies will be the members of your own family?* What an awful thing to say! What an awful thing to hear!

But sometimes, maybe even most of the time, we are not so much tempted by evil; we are tempted by lesser goods. It is not often the things that we fear, the things that bring us brief pleasure and prolonged shame, the things that we know are unbecoming and just wrong that we make into idols. We make idols of the things we love, the things we value most. And whenever we give ourselves to idols, we turn our backs on God!

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis discusses the role of the natural affections, like the affection of a parent for a child:

*There's something in natural affection which will lead it on to eternal love more easily than natural appetite could be led on. But there's also something in it which makes it easier to stop at the natural level and mistake it for the heavenly. Brass is mistaken for gold more easily than clay is. And if it finally refuses conversion its corruption will be worse than the corruption of what [you] call the lower passions. It is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a fiercer devil ...*

*... the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demoniac it will be if it rebels. It's not out of bad mice or bad fleas you make demons, but out of bad archangels. The false religion of lust is baser than the false religion of mother-love or patriotism or art: but lust is less likely to be made into a religion.*

We are brought to life as God's children. Our calling, our vocation, our reason for being, the one thing we can do with our lives that really matters, is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to show our neighbors the same kind of love we show ourselves. But too often, we settle for less!

We choose not to love God, but to love a job, to do what we do exceedingly well, to pour out our life energy to win success. Whether for praise or for money or for pride or just to do it right, we put the job first, and all the other loves in our lives suffer for it -- our families, our friends, ourselves, the neighbors we neglect, and, most of all, God.

Or we choose not to love God, but to love a cause -- a country, a social movement, a mission enterprise -- and we pour out our life energy to make a difference, to leave a legacy. We put the cause first, and all the other loves in our lives suffer for it -- our families, our friends, ourselves, the neighbors we neglect, and, most of all, God.

Or we choose not to love God, but to love a son, a daughter, a father, a mother. We pour out our life energy to provide them happiness. We put family first, and we neglect the neighbors who too need our love, and we neglect the God who wants and deserves and should have all our love.

When we love a job, a cause, a son first, all other loves are diminished and even that love itself is distorted and corrupted because it is all out of proportion to what it is meant to be. But the love of God is a wonderful and mysterious thing! All other loves compete with each other, when we love one thing more, we love another thing less, we have only so much energy and attention and passion to share.

But when we love God with all that we have, it takes away nothing from the love we still have to share with everyone else. When we love God first, other loves do not suffer for it, they reap the benefits! When God comes first, when we do not put anything in our hearts before God, then we fulfill our destiny as God's own children, as creatures made to be like God, and we are freed to offer our love to each other as a gift, not out of need.

We love our children best by loving Jesus best. We are not responsible for our children, or for anyone else. We are responsible to them. We are not owners, but stewards, with profound limits both on our power to make them into whatever they will become and on our right to take any credit for whatever they do become!

So Todd and Pete and Dave and Greg and Gordon and Jeff and John, I do wish you a happy Father's Day. I commend you for the passion you bring to caring for your children. I commend all of you, men and women, married or single, old or young, for the passion you bring to caring for all God's children. Take delight in those God has called you to love. Love them well! But love Jesus best!