

Proper 28 (33) - November 19, 2023

Matthew 19:27-30

“Following Isn’t Easy”

1. Matthew Perry, the actor who portrayed Chandler Bing in the hit TV sitcom “Friends,” died in his California home late last month. He was 54, the age of my little brother.
 - a. Mr. Perry had long struggled with addiction and had been in recovery for years.
 - i. He had gone to rehab several times.
 - ii. Last year he documented this arduous journey in his memoir *Friends, Lovers, and the Big Terrible Thing*.
 - b. One of his close friends is the actor Hank Azaria, who is the voice of over a dozen characters in the animated TV sitcom the Simpsons.
 - c. As it happens, Mr. Azaria and Mr. Perry shared a common journey. They both were in recovery.
 - d. Mr. Azaria wrote a moving tribute in an OpEd in the New York Times last week celebrating the life of his friend, and the impact Mr. Perry had had in his life.
 - i. He wrote: “[Matthew Perry] took me to my first A.A. meeting, in 2005. Matthew quit booze a few years before. He struggled with it, for sure. I didn’t need rehab, but I knew I had a very serious problem, so I called Matthew and asked him to take me to a meeting. We went to this very big gathering in Brentwood, Calif. We walked in, and I swear it seemed there were a thousand people in there. He knew the look on my face — daunted. Beyond daunted: demoralized. It’s very hard to imagine how going into a room like that is somehow going to make you want to stop drinking or make you feel better. And he looked at me and said in his Matthew, half-joking, very loving way: “It’s something, isn’t it? God is a bunch of drunks together in a room.”
 - ii. At the time, I didn’t know what he meant. I’ve since learned. He meant that as bad as we feel, as low as we go, we tend to feel we’re alone in it, whether our problem is alcoholism, a bad marriage, illness, depression, strife. We feel that we are the only one who has ever gone through it; in recovery we call it terminal uniqueness.”
 - iii. And it’s by going into a room with a few or a lot of other people and sharing, saying out loud what it is that’s upsetting us and hearing that from others that we feel, well, maybe we’re not alone. In fact, in time, what we become sure of is that the most unfortunate, terrible things we face are actually our greatest strength, as they connect us with others. And so all that seemingly pointless suffering has a tremendous point. He was telling me I needed the support of those people in the room. I needed their stories. I needed to lean on them.”

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/opinion/matthew-perry-addiction.html?unlocked_article_code=1-kw.h0jv.xKqDM3z8QOeG&smid=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR1uih05K89D9z70kbMPGadCmeDlf2K8P8H2YizkU2TV1GfkVXWV57MlcjY

2. There are groups in our lives which become chosen family, as I've heard some call it.
 - a. The choosing part is different for different people.
 - i. Mr. Perry and Mr. Azaria had made the courageous choice to stay sober, and that brought them into this new family, which in fact, reminded them of their complete dependence on a Higher Power as they choose to define it.
 - b. For some the choosing is perhaps less dramatic, but nevertheless as important
 - i. Perhaps it's the tight group of life-long friends made in college
 - ii. Or the colleagues in the office (even after some move away)
 - iii. Or the family of our spouse which suddenly becomes OUR family
 - c. What may be inferred in the story of Mr. Perry and Mr. Azaria is that there is a cost to entering that new family.
 - i. Their cost is leaving behind a way of life which was in fact killing them.
 - ii. Leaving behind some toxic relationships
 - iii. Or at the very least, laying down such clear boundaries that lead to a new beginning, a brand new start for them.
3. If in Real Estate a Realtor researches Comps to see what a house like yours would currently sell for, are there comps for the emotional cost of leaving one family and entering a chosen family?
 - a. Real Estate Comps depend on timing of sale / neighborhood / region in the country.
 - b. The cost of a clean break to join a chosen family depends on a variety of factors too.
 - c. But the cost is worth it, one would argue, because the chosen family offers a new beginning, a needed new start.
 - d. In the time of Jesus, "chosen families" existed also.
 - i. Biblical scholars refer to them as Surrogate families.
 - ii. On scholar writes: "In antiquity, the extended family meant everything. It not only was the source of one's status in the community but also functioned as the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network. Loss of connection to the family meant the loss of these vital networks as well as loss of connection to the land. But a surrogate family... could serve the same functions as a family of origin. The Christian community acting as a surrogate family is for [the gospel of] Matthew the [context] of the good news. The surrogate family quickly transcended the normal categories of birth, social status, education, wealth, and power... [for those already feeling distanced from their original family], the surrogate family becomes a place of refuge. For the well-connected... giving up one's family of origin for the surrogate Christian family... It meant breaking ties with not only family but the entire social network of

which one had been a part.” (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. By Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh p. 100-101)

- e. And so in our passage, when Peter basically asks Jesus: “We’ve left so much behind (everything!) – will you have our backs?” Jesus acknowledges their sacrifice and assures them they’re in the right place (and that God reward them).
 - i. I’m a little conflicted about the way Peter asked the question
 - 1. It’s a bit like saying “What’s in it for us, Jesus?”
 - 2. But Jesus implies a benefit not listed: you have this family now.
 - 3. Jesus himself, after all, had also left so much behind to rally this movement of healing, justice and compassion.
 - ii. Jesus, as the rabbi, had been pointing them to God in a new way, bringing together a shockingly uncool bunch of folks, from all walks of life, dismantling societal barriers and taboos along the way to gather them.
 - iii. To paraphrase Mr. Perry: “It’s something, isn’t it? We find God by sitting with a bunch of sinners together in a room.”
- 4. Following Jesus isn’t easy.
 - a. It’s not easy just on the most basic challenge of trying to live out his teachings.
 - b. It’s not easy because taking his example seriously puts us at odds with a society and culture that doesn’t take Jesus seriously.
 - c. It’s not easy because there is a cost to choosing the way of Jesus, the way of healing, justice and compassion, when all we hear is “don’t make any waves” or “leave well enough alone” or “you’ve gone from preaching to meddling!”
 - d. And, for some of us, it’s not easy because following Jesus means leaving behind family or networks which don’t get why we are trying to live out our faith.
 - e. There is a cost.
 - f. But, let’s not bury the lead, there is in the process the welcome into the surrogate family, in the family of believers, these imperfect people who are all doing their best to follow the teachings of Jesus.
 - g. And sometimes, SOMETIMES, finding our surrogate faith family does not mean a break with our original family because that original family is part of the gathered body of Christ.
- 5. It’s not easy following Jesus. There is a cost even just for trying to do it right. But there is a blessing in knowing that we sit side by side with people who are all trying to figure it out. Not just in this building, but all around us. Each with their own story. Each with their own struggle. All with the encouragement of a Holy Spirit who brings us into each other’s lives. “It’s something, isn’t it? Finding God in this our common journey.”

Reflection questions

- 1. Share a story of being welcomed into a group / family which wasn’t your original family. Did that require a break with your original family?

2. In Matthew 19:27-30 (and the passage right before it too), it is clear that following Jesus wasn't going to be easy. What were some of the costs the original disciples would have faced for following Jesus?
3. What challenges do you face when trying to live out your faith, trying to follow Jesus' example?