

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 16th Sunday After Pentecost, September 4, 2016

Centering Your Life
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
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Jeremiah 18:1-11 Luke 14:25-33

Have you ever tried to make something on a lathe or a potter's wheel? If so, you know how important it is to have your work centered.

Both the lathe and the potter's wheel require the wood or clay you are working with to be centered. Otherwise what you are trying to make will not be perfect --- quite the contrary --- it is likely to be a mess.

For the lathe, if the piece of wood is not centered, it wobbles and is hard to cut, at best resulting in a finished product with uneven grain and, at worst, resulting in a worthless piece of wood which is good for little more than kindling.

The potter's wheel is more forgiving than the lathe. With it a lump of clay must be centered on the wheel in order to create a perfect piece of pottery. If it is off-center, the piece will wobble and the result will be a malformed article. However the clay is forgiving and can be mashed down, replaced on the center of the wheel, and reworked. The clay, unlike the wood on the lathe, is malleable and can easily be reworked.

You can't hide the fact that your work on the lathe or the potter's wheel was not centered to start with. The results speak for themselves.

Similarly we can't hide our flaws from God. God knows if our lives are centered or not. He knows what our capabilities are and expects us to make the most of them. God is our potter and we are his clay. If we aren't centered on God, God cannot work with us. It is all too easy to center our lives on material things, on everyday activities, on friends and family, to the exclusion of God.

That is the message of our scripture readings from Jeremiah and from Luke.

The reading from Luke comes across as being harsh, very harsh. The King James Bible, the NIV Bible, the New Revised Standard Bible and some other Bible translations say that we must **hate** our father, our mother, and our other family members. Surely we are not being told to hate our family. Our God of love surely would not ask us to do that --- and he doesn't. In the context of the scripture reading we are

really not being told to hate but instead are being told to center our lives on God, rather than on family.

The Living Bible translates verse 26 of the reading from Luke as, *“Anyone who wants to be my follower must love me far more than he does his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, or sisters --- yes, more than his own life --- otherwise he cannot be my disciple.”*

That is a markedly different translation. It certainly doesn't tell us to hate our family. Rather it stresses that we must center our lives on Christ.

The Good News Bible translates verse 26 similarly.

Peterson's The Message uses these words, *“Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters --- yes, even one's own self! --- can't be my disciple.”*

This particular passage of scripture graphically illustrates the trap that we can get into by taking any part of scripture literally. The Bible is the inspired Word of God but it has been translated by fallible human beings and no translation is without error, nor are they infallible or inerrant.

Even though some Bible translations use the word “hate” in referring to family, *“Jesus is clearly not telling the crowd to hate their parents and abandon their children. He is sharply confronting them with the priority of their commitments and implicitly pointing them to the new surrogate family they join as disciples.”*⁽¹⁾

Our Lord and Savior showed his love for everyone and never taught us to hate anyone, most of all our family. What matters is to interpret scripture in context, not one line at a time.

The context here in our two scripture readings is centering --- centering our life on God --- not on other things or other persons.

Where is the center of your life --- material possessions, friends, family, or God? If you are not willing to place God at the center of your life you cannot be a successful Christian.

Are you pulled away from your commitment to God? Does the urgency of life pull you away from visiting the sick, from telling others about Christ, from tending to the needs of others, from prayer, from worship?

God is our potter. We are his clay. We must remain centered on him. If we will not do that, God cannot work with us. It is our responsibility --- ours alone!

In a few minutes we will observe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. As you partake of the bread and wine, consider their true meaning, their focus --- our Lord and Savior. Center your thinking on him and he will mold and shape you. Remain centered on God's vision, not on your own vision.

Amen.

(1) Charles B. Cousar, Texts for Preaching, Year C, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994