

## ATLAS OF THE HEART

### Matthew 10:34-39

When I sit with a couple who wants to get married, I always give them a homework question at the end of our first meeting: “How do you fight?” I admit that “fight” might be a little harsh and so I try to be nicer and say, “How do you carry out an argument?” or “How do you resolve a disagreement?” After all, I would like the couple to come back so we can address this question together.

There is a method, however, to my madness. I ask this question because it gets the couple thinking about the families they grew up in, how their family of origin engaged conflict, and how they relate to the particular way conflict was managed in their families. This is important because they will bring this dynamic into their relationship—whether they want to or not, whether they are aware of it or not. And if they want to build a healthy marriage together, they had best figure out “their way” together. As I say to each couple when we have this discussion, “I don’t know much, but I know enough to be dangerous.”

Well, Jesus is not as nice and diplomatic as I am. At least the Jesus whom the writer of the gospel according to Matthew presents, which we just heard read. Jesus speaks to his disciples about bringing strife into this world, about setting family members against each other, and about carrying their

cross. Rather than making peace and trying to keep it all together, he comes in heavy handed and stirs the pot. Or so it seems.

I have never preached on this “martial Jesus” before. Maybe I never dared to go there because the confrontational language used makes me uncomfortable— until I read Brene Brown’s “Atlas of the Heart.” She is a professor of social work at the University of Houston, a very frank podcaster and TED talker. I am a big fan of hers.

I think the Jesus presented in Matthew’s gospel is a Jesus whom Brene Brown would recognize and like. Reading her latest book provided me access to a text that was locked for me for a long time. She writes: “Boundaries are a prerequisite for compassion and empathy. We cannot connect with someone unless we’re clear about where we end and they begin. If there’s no autonomy between people, then there’s no compassion or empathy, just enmeshment.”

Boundaries. That’s it, I thought. Matthew’s Jesus is not judgmental. He simply makes clear to his followers where he ends and where they begin. He gives them autonomy to be who they are, and by setting clear boundaries, he shows them the importance of differentiation, compassion, empathy, and love.

Many couples, many people, grow up in enmeshed families, which means one or any of the following: their own development takes a back seat to a parents’ need; or family secrets are not to be talked about; or they find themselves in a position where they need to parent their parents, where they become parentified children. I know a little about this because I am one of the people who had a family just like that. The cross I carry (at least

one of my crosses) is that I really don't like conflict. Maybe some of you can relate. But here is Jesus again, laying it out plainly:

"I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." In saying this, Jesus did not come up with something new. Instead, he continues to stand in a long tradition of Psalmists who plead with God and attest: "It is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother's children."

Jesus's call upon his disciples, and upon us, to better sort out our most intimate relationships before we sign on to follow him, is clear. And this call does not only impact our family ties. It includes our political affiliations, our church membership, our workplaces, our friendships, and any other relationship which requires us to take a good look at "where we end and where *they* begin." If that relationship requires us to "disappear," to give up our autonomy, it is not a relationship in which we can grow and thrive. It is not a relationship of differentiation, empathy, compassion, love and freedom, but rather a prison of enmeshment. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

What a refreshing way to engage life. We do not have to be held back by our family ties, by political alliances for alliances sake, or by theological constructs which served our ancestors well, but may not serve us well anymore. If we do, we will be caught in a net of endless tangles and will lose ourselves in the process.

As Jesus said: Hanging on to old alliances, structures, and strictures will not give us life. Just the opposite. In doing so, we will lose our lives. So, if we want life—real life; divine life—it's time to let go of our old ways so Jesus can show us *the* way.

In the Oscar winning movie *A Star is Born*, Bradley Cooper's character Jackson Maine—a man troubled and haunted by his abusive upbringing—picks up an old guitar in a dive bar, steps up to the microphone, and sings a Jason Isbell song:

“Maybe it's time to let the old ways die / maybe it's time to let the old ways die / It takes a lot to change a man / hell, it takes a lot to try / maybe it's time to let the old ways die.”

Sounds a lot like he discovered the atlas of his heart. Sounds a lot like Jesus to me.

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