

Thirteenth Sunday *per annum*
Year A, 2026

2 Kgs 4:8-16
Ps 89

Rom 6:3-4, 8-11
Mt 10:37-42

Parents, patrimony, patriotism, possession

Y'all remember the movie, *Finding Nemo*, I'm sure, with its hilarious portrayal of seagulls as brainless and dimwitted creatures. As goofy as they are, though, there is something disturbing and threatening about them. They know only one word: "mine." Sometimes it is a question: "mine?" Sometimes it is a statement: "mine." Sometimes, all the seagulls at once speak their only word, and silly as they are, their voices together become a menacing barrage of noise: "Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine!"

Possessiveness. It's a problem. My pew. My seat. My spot. – My things. My stuff. My property. My rights. – My voice. My team. My party. My country. My way. The list is never-ending. Mine! Mine! Mine! There is a word for all the stuff that belongs to us, all the things that we consider ours: *patrimony*, from the Latin word *pater*, meaning father.

Our patrimony is what we inherit, what our mothers and fathers leave to us as a legacy: land, possessions, property, money. Our patrimony, though, is also personal, cultural, linguistic, national, ethnic, religious. We are shaped and formed by our patrimony, so much so that it is an intimate part of who we are. We belong to it as much as it belongs to us. It is therefore natural and right that

we should love our patrimony and want to safeguard and protect it. We honor it, as we are taught to honor our mother and our father. This is the sense of another word that derives from the Latin word for father: *patriotism*, love of the fatherland, the *patria*.

Because this love of patrimony (be it parents, nation, culture) is a form of love of self, it can become problematic, and it almost always does. What should be a wholesome love for parents, for country, for language and culture becomes corrupted by the insistence that these things are mine, mine, mine. So much mine that they alone make me who I am. I define myself by them and they are inseparable from me. So much mine that they cannot also be yours. I am so much mine that I cannot be yours.

Such possessiveness becomes a circle that closes in on itself, resulting in a corrupt and counterfeit love. Love of family becomes tribalism. Love of country becomes nationalism. Love of self becomes egocentrism. Love closed in on itself naturally leads to hatred: hatred of those who are not me in the case of egocentrism; hatred of those who are not of my family or clan or ethnic group in the case of tribalism; hatred of those who are not of my country in the case of nationalism.

Jesus, as he so often does, turns these things on their heads. His teachings are hard, but he alone has the words of everlasting life (Jn 6:68). In today's gospel, from the tenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says: "*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 likewise, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus says: “If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26).

To understand the broader meaning (and application) of Jesus’s words, we have to move beyond the immediate literal sense of father and mother, beyond the precise sense of the bonds of kinship that Jesus mentions. We can take “love of father and mother” to mean “love of those things that make me who I am.” So, yes, my family, my language, my culture, my country – my *religion* even – make me who I am, are somehow and in some sense mother and father to me.

As hard as it might be to imagine turning our backs on our parents, we might well imagine the difficulty of turning away from our own language, our own culture, our own country. And yet, that it precisely what Jesus demands of those who would be his disciples. As I said, our patrimony touches upon our deepest identity, shapes our way of knowing who and what we are in the world, and is an intimate part of how we know our very selves.

Knowing and defining myself primarily by my patrimony, I am indeed challenged or perhaps even threatened by Jesus’s words: whoever loves their father or mother, their cultural and historical patrimony, their patriotic identity ... whoever loves however they conceive of and perceive themselves ... in short, whoever in all

these ways loves themselves more than Jesus is not worthy to be his disciple, cannot be his disciple.

Or to use the formulation found in Luke: To hate one's own father and mother, one's own patrimony, one's own way of understanding oneself in the world, one's own life is in some sense to hate one's own self. And without this very particular kind of "self hatred," we cannot be a Christian disciple.

These sayings, understood in their fullness, are so hard to understand, so hard to accept, that Jesus completes his teaching in such a way that there can be no mistaking his meaning: *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* Jesus knows how radical are the implications of his teachings about love of father and mother and love of him: they are about life and death.

Naturally, we want to preserve our lives. And inseparable from our lives are our identities, our patrimony. This desire to preserve identity is a foundational human drive, an instinct we might even say. And yet, according to the teachings of Jesus, the more we cling to our lives as they are defined by family, clan, language, culture, nation, or whatever else, the more we lose them. The greater the grip, the greater the slip.

We are terribly possessive of our identities, however we identify ourselves – black or white, gay or straight, conservative or liberal, Catholic or Protestant, American or un-American, male or female,

Democrat or Republican, Cajun or Yankee – and we are possessive of the patrimonies that underly those identities. This is not a new problem. It is one that St Paul repeatedly fought against two thousand years ago. As we read in his letter to the Galatians: *“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal 3:27-28). Paul would say similar things in his other letters (Rom 10:12; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11), so obviously this was a widespread and pressing concern then, and it remains so today.

Insistence on patrimonial identity leads to nowhere good: identity politics leads to culture wars, and culture wars simply reinforce identity politics. All this patrimonial possessiveness leads only to impoverishment. What we possess possesses us. And such possession is of the evil one, who cannot love and unite, but who hates and divides.

Along these lines, let me remind you of that strange and sometimes overlooked episode in the gospel (Mk 3:20ff), where Jesus was teaching, saying these wonderful and hard and radical things, when scribes from Jerusalem accused him of being possessed by Beelzebul and some of his relatives wanted to seize him, saying *“He is out of his mind.”* When Jesus’s mother and family went out to him, worried and concerned, and asked for him, those in the crowd around him told him: *“Your mother and your brothers [and your sisters] are outside asking for you.”* But he said to them in

reply, "Who are my mother and [my] brothers?" And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. [For] whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Following his Father's will was costing Jesus his patrimony in this life. His family thought he was crazy. His fellow countrymen, those who shared his language and culture and ethnicity, were turning against him. He was losing everything that defined his identity, except for one thing: that he is the Son of the Father and doing his Father's will his only purpose. Jesus was being dispossessed of his entire human patrimony. Not enough, it seems, that God the Son gave up his heavenly place, the glory of the Father, which is his glory by eternal right, and left it all behind, emptying himself of his equality with God, to be with us. Now, he will be made to give up even his human patrimony – mother, family, language, culture, nationality, ethnicity, religion.

In the face of such dispossession, though, Jesus did not relent or retreat. Later on (Mk 10:17ff) he encountered a rich young man who wanted to know what he had to do to *inherit* eternal life – a question about patrimony. Jesus told him to keep the commandments and to give all that he had to the poor and then to come and follow him. The man went away sad, "for he had many possessions." Possessed by his patrimony, he was not free, he could not follow Jesus as a disciple, he would not inherit eternal life. Whoever keeps his life will lose it, whoever loses his life will keep it. Possession and patrimony.

As that encounter ended, Jesus turned to his disciples and told them that the wealthy – those who are rich in patrimony – would have a hard time entering the kingdom of God. The disciples were amazed. Jesus doubled down: It is *“easier for a camel to pass through [the] eye of needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”* Now they are *“exceedingly astonished.”* Worried, reeling with incomprehension, Peter protested: but Lord, *“we have given up everything and followed you.”* Now, at long last, came words of comfort and consolation:

Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.”

In his compassion for his disciples who must suffer the necessary patrimonial dispossession, Jesus reveals that he does not want them to be poor, but to be rich. Dispossession leads to a greater inheritance. To enjoy the promised heavenly patrimony, we will have to renounce our earthly patrimony. Why do we not shed the paltry rags of our earthly possessions that fade and falter, when we are assured of such a lasting and glorious inheritance?

In the age to come, in the age of eternal life, there will only be oneness in Christ. Every other distinction will be obliterated. But in this age, Jesus means for those who wish to follow him and to

be his disciples that we should *at least* be willing and ready to dispossess ourselves of our human patrimonial possessions, of everything that we use to define, understand, and identify ourselves in favor of one thing – to be his disciples and to follow after him, to do the Father's will just as he did.

We must prefer nothing to Christ – not family, not country, not culture, not status or identity of any kind. Anything else, anything less, is unworthy of him.

Lord, I am not worthy. But only say the word...