What was that all about?

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children cannot be my disciple.”

Oh, and give away everything.

Well… we could turn to the other lessons today, but they don’t seem much better, and let me remind you that I don’t pick these.

For those unacquainted with the peculiar ways of the Episcopal Church, the lessons come in a three-year rotation called the lectionary shared by many denominations including ours. This Sunday we get these gems.

To change the lessons requires permission of the bishop, and she was a little busy this week.

It is tempting to skip over these lessons and talk about something much easier like baseball.

But let’s see what we can do here.

First, let me underline a premise that may be so obvious we miss it:

How we hear these ancient biblical passages says a great deal about how we view our relationship with God, which is another way of saying, how we hear these passages is not just an academic exercise but is really about how we live our life.

This morning, I draw upon the work of a contemporary theologian, James Alison, who is a former Dominican monk and a brilliant author who likes to use everyday objects to illustrate his points.

Alison compares biblical passages to a Lego set. Legos, for those who have been living on another planet, come in all shapes, colors and sizes, and you can fit them together to build just about anything you want – a house, for example.

Bible passages are like Lego pieces; we can build them into a house any way we want to support our pre-conceived ideas about God. Here is one way to build a Lego house with the biblical passages we hear today:

From the Prophet Jeremiah, we are told that God will bring evil against you unless you “amend your ways.”

Then to Paul’s Letter to Philemon: it doesn’t seem to fit much of anything, so we are going to leave those Lego pieces aside for now and go straight to the Gospel of Luke:
“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother…”

After you do that, then take up your cross and get ready to be crucified. This Lego house gives us the image of a wrathful, vengeful God who only allows a tiny number of worthy people to be admitted inside. This Lego house is built to keep people out.

This is the way much of our culture – and much of the religious world in general – hears these biblical passages, and then uses these passages to defend social structures that divide people into the worthy and the unworthy, the elect and the non-elect.

Truthfully, Christian history is full of people using the Bible to support everything from slavery to the subjugation of women and many other kinds of people.

But maybe there is another way of building our biblical Lego house that is closer to how Jesus intends us to understand Scripture.

From Jeremiah, we hear how we are like a piece of clay. God is the potter who shapes us, with all our flaws, into a beautiful jar. We are the clay and God is the potter.

Then we get this extraordinary – and brief – letter from Paul to Philemon. We hear all of it today.

The letter seems to have no outward theological content, but don’t let outward appearances fool you.

Paul is writing to a slave owner, Philemon, pleading with him to legally free his slave, Onesimus, who has escaped and is with Paul.

Paul sends Onesimus back to his master, but asks the master to view his slave as a “beloved brother” – to treat his slave as an equal – and then free him on the basis of love.

Paul wants both slave and owner to be liberated from the brutal economy of humans owning other humans.

By the way, it is thought that this letter was kept and cherished by the early church because Onesimus was, in fact, freed from slavery, and went on to become a bishop.

And then we come to Jesus and his teaching to “hate mother and father.”

This really is not a recipe guide for creating a dysfunctional family. We do that quite well on our own. Rather, Jesus attacks head-on the most violent social structure of his time – the allegiances of tribe and family that lead to blood feuds and endless cycles of retribution.

Jesus says, you can’t be my disciple if you are going to make your tribe your highest value. You can’t be my disciple if your highest value is retribution and revenge.
But lest you think these values are behind us, in our daily life, we deal with social distinctions created by race and class, educational degrees, family connections, religious affiliations, political parties, gender and sexual orientation, just to name a few.

Some of these social distinctions help us to maneuver through a complicated world, but all can become barriers to seeing each other as the beloved of God.

On an even deeper level, all of these social distinctions can become barriers to our relationship with God.

Or to put it another way, you can’t pretend to be a disciple of Jesus if all you do is build Lego houses that keep people out.

There are Lego pieces that connect all of these lessons today. All of these lessons are about the power of God’s Grace to transform lives.

Grace is difficult to define, so the biblical writers use vivid images to tell us about grace: The potter shaping clay; the psalm celebrating God who traces our journey; the slave owner who frees his slave; and the followers of Jesus who give away everything so that they gain their souls.

Grace is the power of God to transform our lives in ways we cannot yet imagine.

And Grace often comes when we don’t see it at the time.

Yet, it is true, we are flawed – yes, sinful – human beings. We do bad stuff to each other and to ourselves. We do need to “amend our ways.”

But God never gives up on us, and like a potter, molds us into beautiful vessels of grace. Over and over, God heals the cracked and broken pottery within us.

There is a question imbedded in each of these biblical lessons today: If we claim to follow Jesus, what kind of disciples will we be? Will we be narrow, hard-hearted, serving people only like ourselves?

Or will we commit daring acts of kindness, generosity and compassion – and reach far beyond any walls that try to hold us back?

What kind of Lego house will we build?

We get a lifetime to answer. AMEN.

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