

4th Sunday of Easter, C

I am for the most part inclined to emphasize the demands that Christ makes upon us rather than the benefits that he offers us. This, no doubt, is a reaction to those who would make the Christian faith a kind of glorified success cult, promising everything from good health to great wealth as a reward for discipleship.

One group, for example, speaks of what they call “God’s formula for success.” And they go on to explain that anyone who finds and follows that formula will have an instant solution to virtually all of his problems – financial, social, and otherwise.

Well that claim, of course, is not new or unique. Across the years, Jesus has been variously represented as a super salesman, a remedy for all sorts of physical disorders and emotional disturbances, a peerless guide to professional and vocational fulfillment, and a model for any and all who may wish to win friends and influence people. In response to such distortions of the gospel, we should not overlook two basic truths. One is that people do come to Christ in search of something to change and enrich their own lives; and the other is that the New Testament does speak about certain benefits to the believer.

The Gospel reading for today includes some reference to these benefits. In the Gospel of John Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.”

Well, let us be honest – all of us who claim to follow Jesus do so out of a certain degree of self-interest. None of us worship God from a strictly pure and unselfish motive. In back of our Christian discipleship is at least a little bit of that old question, “What is in it for me?”

And it is to that question I wish address in this moment. We should keep in mind that Jesus never sought to win disciples with promises of pie in the sky or instant success here on earth. To the contrary, he warned that life would be hard and demanding for those who took him seriously. But at the same time, he did speak of certain rewards of faith. Let me mention what I see as four legitimate benefits that belong to the believer.

The first is the assurance of love that will never let us go. I need that and so do you. And the strange thing is this: it is when we feel and act the most unlovable that we need love the most. We have that in Christ. He never stops loving us. Since we did not gain his love by being lovable, it stands to reason that we cannot lose it by being unlovable.

A blind song writer by the name of George Matheson saw that truth with the eyes of his soul and wrote it down in a beautiful hymn. The first verse says this:

“Oh Love that will not let me go
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.”

That is the first benefit of the believer – the assurance of a love that will never, ever let us go.

The second is membership in a community. Jesus spoke of sheep, using the plural word, indicating a flock. The Christian faith, from its very beginning, has been a family religion. It borrows heavily from the vocabulary of the family. God is father. We are his children. Disciples are brothers and sisters in the Lord. The church is seen as a family of faith, and what a far-reaching, world-wide family it is.

If you are part of this family that is called the church, you will find brothers and sisters wherever you may go. That is a priceless benefit. We all need to belong. Think of how much loneliness there is in this community, in this city, in this world. Let us resolve that. Christ has given to us a community of faith. It now becomes our privilege and responsibility to share that fellowship with others whose hearts are lonely.

A third benefit that belongs to believers is participation in a cause that is larger than ourselves. There is a verse in the Old Testament that says, “The little foxes that ruin the vineyard.” So it is with our lives. It is the little things that demand our attention, waste our energies and keep us from becoming the men and women that we really ought to be. What every life needs is one great unifying principle that pulls it together and gives it strength, direction, and purpose.

Jesus Christ gives us that kind of cause. He called it the Kingdom of God. You may call it whatever you choose; but if you ever become involved in it, you will never run short of a reason for living. There will always be someone who needs your love.

The fourth benefit is awareness of God's providence over our lives. The person of faith lives with a sense of being guided and guarded. Those who live closest to God can tell experiences that can only be described as divinely directed. No doubt, there are people here who have stood a critical moment in their lives and could now rise to testify to the leadership of the Lord. It is a mystery, hard to explain, but it is real.

We would not make our religion a kind of vending machine where we put in faith and take out success; not that at all. But there are definite benefits to being a follower of Christ. To these we testify, and for these we are grateful. **Amen.**