

My sermon today grows out of a conviction that for many of us our religious faith is far too casual and easy-going. Indeed, an entire history of the church could be written in terms of the way we have devised to make our religious commitment as easy as possible. We have done it through rituals that can be observed so casually that they cost very little and mean virtually nothing. We have done it by making orthodoxy of belief the primary test of Christian devotion.

But our Gospel reading for today confronts us with other tests which cannot be taken so casually or fulfilled so easily. Jesus was talking to his apostles. Perhaps he had seen in some of them this tendency to a casual, easy-going religious faith. Or maybe he was preparing them for their future ministry, warning them not to lower the standards of discipleship in order to recruit followers. In any case he said to them, “Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me. He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin, whereas he who brings himself to naught for me discovers who he is.”

Notice that through that entire paragraph our Lord said nothing about observance of ritual or consent to creed. Instead, he talked about some things that go far deeper and cost much more. And this is not to discount the ritual observances or creedal statements of our faith. It is simply to say that if we hold them lightly and practice them casually, they are not the kind of commitment that Christ requires of his followers.

What he calls for in our reading is a supreme devotion that exceeds our devotion to father or mother, son or daughter. And to that imposing group we could add the names of all other family members and friends.

Let me ask you this question, and try to answer it honestly: Who or what is the most important thing in your life?

Admittedly, that is not an easy question to answer. Our lives are involved with so many things and include so many devotions that it is difficult to isolate one as central and supreme. But something or someone is. All of our lives are organized into a hierarchy of commitments and concerns, and at the top sets one supreme devotion to which we subordinate and would even sacrifice all of the rest.

For some people that supreme devotion is tragic and shameful. I have seen people mastered by sexual appetite; and they sacrifice everything to it, including family and self-respect. I have known of people mastered by drugs. So great is their devotion to that addiction they allow it to break their health and turn them into thieves. Some business men are utterly mastered by their greed for wealth and power. Everything takes second place to that, including their wife and children.

But other people have supreme devotions which are not at all sordid and ugly. For a wife, it may be her husband; and that is a lovely thing. For young parents, it may be their baby; and that, too, is a beautiful thing. For a teacher, it may be her work and her students. Few sights on earth are more inspiring than that.

But when we turn to our reading, we find Christ challenging, not the sordid and ugly, but even the high and holy. Love for him, he insists, must take precedence over love for father or mother, son or daughter. In every life, there can be only one supreme devotion; and that is the place our Lord would claim as His own.

Next, he confronts our casual commitment with the challenge of the cross, "He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me."

We should keep in mind that our Lord asks nothing of us that he did not first require of himself. The cross became a literal reality in his life. He saw it coming, but he would not turn aside nor back away. So they crucified him for loving too deeply, for caring too much, for speaking too plainly. And by his death he has

transformed the cross into a symbol of self-sacrifice as the only way of redemption.

Nothing really gets changed; nobody really gets saved, until somebody puts his or her life on the line. That's what Jesus did for the whole world; and that is what he is calling on you and me to do.

We must get involved, my friends. We will never change things casually. Here, I suspect, is the major reason why popular Christianity is so irrelevant to the problems of our day. For the condition of our world today is tragic, and its needs are profound. The ruin of sin is disastrous, and the cost of redemption will be great. We will never lift, or redeem, or help this world with a half-hearted casual commitment.

That is why Christ calls us to take up our cross and come after him. It's the only thing that will make any difference. We must get in the trenches and put our lives on the line, just like he did. With the challenge of the cross, he confronts our casual commitment.

And finally, he confronts us with a call to practical service.

This reading, that begins with an appeal for supreme devotion and continues with appeal for sacrificial cross-bearers, ends with an appeal for a cup of cold water.

To some that may seem an anti-climax. Here is our Lord challenging us to love him more than father or mother, to take our cross and come after him. Then he concludes by saying, "I promise you that whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones will not want for his reward."

But with Jesus, that was not anti-climactic. He always cared for the small things, such as a widow's two pennies and a peasant boy's lunch. Serving Christ and sharing his cross is seldom some big dramatic thing that claims the spotlight or

grabs the headlines. In fact, I am less and less impressed with and more and more suspicious of that kind of religion.

The best way we can show our supreme devotion to Jesus Christ is by getting personally involved in the practical daily needs of people. When and if we do that, we will find ourselves bearing a cross. It's a costly thing to really care about people. But be honest now: Is any other kind of religion even worth the bother?