13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, A

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 how we have devised ways 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 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 his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."**

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: 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 our lives are organized into a hierarchy of commitments and concerns, and at the top of this hierarchy is one supreme devotion to which we subordinate and would even sacrifice all 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 people mastered by drugs. So great is their devotion to that addiction that they allow it to break their health and turn them into thieves. Some businessmen 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: **"whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me."**

We should keep in mind that our Lord asks nothing of us that he did not require of himself at first. 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 changes; nobody really gets saved until someone puts their 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. 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 this world or help it with a half-hearted, casual commitment.

That is why Christ calls us to take up our cross and follow him. It is 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 issues a call to practical service.

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

To some, that may seem strange. Here is our Lord challenging us to love him more than father or mother, to take up our cross and follow him. Then he concludes by saying, **"whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward."**

But with Jesus, that was not strange. 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 impressed with and more suspicious of that kind of religion.

The best way we can show our supreme devotion to Jesus Christ is for me to get personally involved in the practical, daily needs of people. When and if we do that, we will find ourselves bearing a cross. It is a costly thing

to really care about people. But be honest now: Is any other kind of religion even worth the bother? **Amen**.