I

Children
How many of you know what it is like to be the smallest one in the group? Did any of you have friends who are bigger, or big brothers and sisters so that it seems like you are always the smallest one around? If you know what it feels like to be the smallest one in a crowd, you will know what one of the disciples of Jesus felt like. His name was James and he had a brother Matthew, who was also a disciple. His mother and another brother were also followers of Jesus but they were not part of the group that we call the apostles. There was another James who had a brother John who was part of the group known as apostles but he was great big and strong. When people talked about James, they wanted to tell others about whom they were referring to, they simply said the "Lesser." If he lived today the disciples might have nicknamed him "Shorty" or "Smallfry" or "Little Bit" but they called him the "Lesser." We don't know what Jesus called him for sure, but it must have been something like that since everyone else called him "James the Lesser."

A lot of us have nicknames. Some of our nicknames are more real than our real names. If a boy can run fast they call him "Speedy" or if he is from Texas they call him "Tex." Nicknames are the names that we give people who look a certain way, or are from a certain place. We should always remember how to use names, though, and be careful not to call someone with a name that will hurt him and make him feel badly. When Jesus and the disciples called James the "Lesser" they were not talking about the way that he did his job. He did his job very well and all the disciples respected him. When you call someone "dummy" or "fatty" you are making fun of him and hurting his feelings.

James was a short man, but he had a big job. He preached to the people and taught them what Jesus had said and done and he was a great disciple. It is said that James the Lesser was brave enough to die for Jesus. He may have been short in height but he was full of courage.

Some of you have nicknames and you love them. Maybe you have a nickname that you do not like too well because you don't think that it fits you. If you don't like your name, do not answer to it, and people will soon stop calling you by that name. James must have liked his name, because all of the disciples called him the "Lesser" and he answered to it. He did his job and went wherever the Spirit of God called him.

"James the Lesser" is a name and a man to remember since he did one of the big jobs for Jesus. He was a friend and an apostle and everyone knew him because he was the shortest man in the group. When someone met James the Lesser, they never forgot him and what is even more important is that they didn't forget what he had to say or what he did. He was a friend of Jesus who taught other men to love God as much as he did.

James the Lesser was a short man with big courage.

Adult

I would like to speak of the whole Chapter of the Gospel and not just the ending, because the ending becomes clearer when we look at what came before.

Now I would like to stop the world for just one minute and ask you to think back. Think back with me to the first century. Think about those 50 years after Jesus’ death and what it must been like for Jesus’ disciples. Before the last one died their efforts had brought 500,000 men women, and children into the ranks of the church. But what they had to suffer in order to accomplish this task is seldom discussed. We like the outcome of their discipleship but we don’t want to hear the cost of discipleship. So, for the record here is the cost: History tells us…

1. John died of extreme old age exiled to the island of Patmos.
2. Judas Iscariot, after betraying his Lord, hanged himself.
3. Peter was crucified; head downward, during the persecution of Nero.
4. Andrew died on a cross at Patrae, a Grecian Colony.
5. James, the lesser, son of Alphaeus, was thrown from a pinnacle of the Temple, and then beaten to death with a club.
6. Bartholomew was flayed alive in Albanapolis, Armenia.
7. James, the elder son of Zebedee, was beheaded at Jerusalem.
8. Thomas, the doubter, was run through the body with a lance at Coromandel, in the East Indies.
9. Philip was hanged against a pillar at Heropolis.
10. Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows.
11. Simon died on a cross in Persia (what we now call Iran.).
12. Matthew was first stoned and then beheaded.

What sacrifices! And I ask you why? Why did they choose to die this way? Why desert your father and mother, your wife and child, and your home? Why put up with the constant humiliation, and hunger, and persecution, and defeat town after town after town?

I’ll tell you why, because, in the words of Apostle Paul, they were held captive by the words and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is Paul’s way of saying they were slaves to Christ.

It is quite likely we shall never be tested to the extent that the disciples were but there are some ways to gauge our commitment. Let’s look at a couple this morning:

**I. Sacrifice is a Sign of Mature Faith.**

If you have been a Christian for some long time, I would suggest that the sacrifices you make are the tell-tale sign of a mature commitment. The Army makes young men and women mature persons because they have to be mature to live the life of sacrifice it demands. Let’s look at the text. Jesus does not mince words with the 12 Apostles. He says, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” I know that it is common in church circles, particularly when the church is involved in the political arena, to say that the church is for peace. And there is some truth to that. But we do the message of Jesus a disservice when we ignore his other teachings that show the confrontational nature of Christianity.

But what kind of sword is it that Jesus brings? Lord knows we have enough swords as it is. It is surprising to find that the sword he wields is used to divide the family. Jesus finished his thought this way: “For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own house hold.” Now what is Jesus talking about? What Jesus anticipates is that within Jewish circles a commitment to him will bring division within the family. A son who follows Christ will be at odds with a father who rejects the resurrection. A mother who becomes a disciple will be at odds with a daughter who believes she can live as she desires. A son-in-law will be at odds with the in-laws because he has led their daughter away from traditional Judaism.

No greater example can be found for the divisive nature of the Gospel than the life of Paul. Paul was an outstanding colleague among his peers. A Pharisee of Pharisees he calls himself. So trusted by the religious establishment, he was given the task of going to Damascus to arrest those who had fallen in with the disciples. But on that fated trip down the Damascus road he encountered the One whom he thought was dead. He encountered the resurrected Christ. His life was suddenly turned upside down. He now found himself on the other side—one of the followers of Christ and as a result he found himself at odds with his old colleagues. Nothing could be done to salvage the relationships that were lost. He was suddenly cut off. Cut off from his career and his family. Paul was going to Damascus with a sword in his hands to persecute the Christians; he found Christ on that road and suddenly the sword was turned upon him. Yes he found peace but he also found a sword which cut him off from his past.

How mature are you in the faith? Don’t answer with the number of years you have been in the church; answer with the level of sacrifices you have made.

**II. Hospitality is a Sign of Discipleship.**

What of the newest Christian among us? Those who are starting out in their faith. I would advise you that showing hospitality is the first step in Christian discipleship. The famous anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked this question: What was the earliest sign of civilization in any given culture? He expected the answer to be a clay pot or perhaps a fish hook or grinding stone. Her answer was "a healed femur." The femur, of course, is the leg bone above the knee. Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do that injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization. I would contend that it is also the first sign of the work of Christ in the life of a Christian.

Jesus understood the importance of civility. Hospitality has fallen on some hard times these days but it shouldn’t be that way in the church. Jesus pointed out that even the smallest act of kindness shall be rewarded.

It is staggering to think of the personal wealth of someone like Bill Gates. He is worth over 100 billion dollars. Several years ago he earmarked 1 billion dollars over a 20 year period to endow a charitable trust for education and health. None of us will come close to making a contribution of that magnitude. Jesus recognized that there are various levels of kind acts. “Those who help a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet reward” Jesus said. He added, “Those who receive a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward.” But then he says, “And if anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones (he was talking about those who help his disciples), I tell you the truth,” he concluded, “he will certainly not lose his reward.

A small gesture to be sure—a cup of cold water—but none the less important because, and here is the significance: The act indicates that the person is open to the message of the disciple. He who receives you receives me, Jesus said. In a small act of kindness is the large act of receiving the Gospel of Christ.

I like the legend about the famous monastery which had fallen on very hard times. Its many buildings were once filled with young monks, and chapel resounded with the singing of the choir. But now it was deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. Only a handful of old monks remained.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a tiny hut. He came there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: "The rabbi walks in the woods.”

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and bear his heart to him. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced.

As he entered the hut, he saw in the middle of the room a wooden table with the Scriptures open. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and broke down.

After the tears and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. "You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts," he said. "You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again."

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, "The Messiah is among you." The Abbot stood in stunned silence. Then the rabbi said, "Now you must go." The abbot left without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them that he had received a teaching from the rabbi who walks in the woods, and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, "The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah."

The monks were startled and thought to themselves: "What could it mean? Is brother John the Messiah? No, he's too old and crotchety. Is brother Thomas? No, he's too stubborn and set in his ways. Am I the Messiah? What could this possibly mean?" They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, though, something began to happen at the monastery. The monks began to treat one another with a reverence. They were gentle with one another. They lived with one another as brothers once again. Visitors found themselves deeply moved by the genuine caring and sharing that went on among them. Before long, people were again coming from great distances to be nourished by the prayer life of these monks. And young men were asking, once again, to become part of the community.

Jesus said, He who receives you receives me. Hospitality…because in one another we see face of Christ. It is the first step in Christian Discipleship.

**III. A Cup of Water is a Sign that Christ is Welcome.**

I cannot begin to tell you the reward that is waiting for everyone of us who believe. Not even the smallest kindness will be missed by a Father who is ever watching.

And while it is true that as a disciples of Christ we must live a life of peace; we must be ever vigilant that that peace can also be a dagger. Commitment to Christ can separate us form those we love. Jesus brings peace but it’s peace between God and man. There is no guarantee that that peace will exist between us, not even between members of the same household. The mature disciple will make note of this.

But never underestimate the power of a cold cup of water. Hospitality toward one another is a sign that Christ is welcome. And where Christ is welcome all things are possible. Even the swords that divide us can be sheathed by hospitality. Work towards peace but be prepared for conflict and keep a cold cup of water waiting by the door. Amen.

II

Children

Good morning, boys and girls. Has anybody been to the beach this year or to a swimming pool? Everyone who has been somewhere where there is water to swim in should hold up his hand. Almost everybody. Now this is the big question. How many of you know how to swim? How many of you can go through the water without putting your feet down to touch the bottom? Some of you can, and some of you can't. I know that when I go to the beach or the pool I see two kinds of people. There are the ones who can swim and the ones who cannot swim. I can always tell the difference between the two.

Let me show you what I mean. Some people who cannot swim come to the beach with chairs and blankets, some suntan lotion, sunglasses, a radio, and maybe a football. That is one kind of person who comes to the beach. Then there is another kind of person. He brings suntan lotion and a blanket, but he also has flippers, a raft, and an underwater mask. Now which person do you think comes to swim and which person to sit on the beach? You guessed, the one with the mask and flippers has come to swim.

If you can't swim, you feel afraid of the water and you sit on the land. Once in a while you may wade a little or sit down in the shallow part, but you can't go out in the water that is over your head unless you know how to swim. Being able to swim makes you another kind of person.

The same thing is true about the person who loves God and is a servant of God. People who do not know God and follow him are afraid of living life the way God meant it. Trusting that God is going to give you eternal life allows you to go all the way in life. The person who swims can go anywhere. He can walk on land, or swim in water, but the person who cannot swim must always stick close to shore. The same thing is true with people who believe in God. You who trust in God are not worried about when you will die, because you know that God has an even better life waiting for you after you die. Christians are like people who go to the beach with flippers and masks. They are able to swim in life and are not afraid of anything...

If you can't swim, then learn how and learn well so that you can enjoy the beach more. If you know anyone who is not a Christian, then tell him about Jesus so that he can love life more and not be afraid. That is what being a Christian is all about on earth. It is living and not being afraid and knowing that God has an even better life planned for you in heaven.

I
In January 1985, a large suitcase was discovered at the customs office of the Los Angeles International Airport. Inside the suitcase was the dead body of an unidentified young woman. U.S. Customs agents who discovered the body immediately launched an investigation. What they uncovered was a tale of a horrible tragedy that resulted from the desperate desire of two young people for freedom. The dead woman was the wife of a young Iranian living in the U.S. Her desire was to join her husband. However she was

unable to obtain a visa. So, she took matters into her own hands. She squeezed herself into a large suitcase and had it smuggled onto a jet headed for the United States. It was a foolish endeavor. Even if she had survived the journey in the cargo bay of the jet, she would have remained an illegal alien spending the rest of her life looking over her shoulder fearing discovery. And so she died a lonely death squeezed into a tiny space in the cargo hold of an airplane. (1)

As we prepare to celebrate our nation’s birth, it would be good for us to ponder what American citizenship has meant to many people over the past two hundred years, and what it means to many who seek to enter our land today. People, including many of our own ancestors, have gone to extraordinary lengths to make America their home. **What is it about this land that has made it so attractive to the rest of the world**? Doubtless many people come here looking for work. They are tired of eking out a subsistence living in their own land. They know that this is truly a land of economic opportunity. Most of them come here and work hard and become an asset to their community and to our country.

Others live in lands torn with crime or outright oppression by their own government. They come here looking for security. It’s interesting in a sad way. As Pope Francis has noted there are more Christian martyrs in the past 100 years than in the first centuries. Yesterday was the feast day of 46 Ukrainian Catholic priests and nuns who were killed by the Communists because they did not renounce the Catholic Church. Few people die in traditional warfare nowadays, that is, war between nations. Most people who die today from violence are killed either in crimes or they are the victims of terrorism or they are victims of violence from their own governments. There are still some very cruel authoritarian governments in many parts of the world.
So people come to America as they have for 200 years for economic opportunity or to flee crime or persecution in their own countries. Who can blame either group? Particularly if you have a family, you will go to extraordinary lengths to provide them with a better life.
But there is another reason people have risked their very lives to come to this land. And it’s summed up in one word: Freedom. Blessed freedom. That’s what America has stood for more than anything else since its founding two hundred years ago. It was founded by a group of individuals who had an amazing vision of a better way of structuring government--of the people, for the people, by the people. Freedom. What a powerful word. What an amazing idea. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom to pursue one’s dreams--we dare not take these things for granted. And so in two days, on July 4th, we will enjoy picnics and parades and fireworks to celebrate, as generations have before us, the gift of freedom.
For Christians, however, every worship service ought to be a celebration of freedom--for the most important freedom available in this world is the freedom that only Christ can bring--freedom from sin and death, freedom from fear and failure, freedom from anger and vindictiveness.
Perhaps we should replace our Call to Worship with fireworks and our organ with a brass band. Why? Because nearly 1800 years before our ancestors fought at Valley Forge, someone else died for our freedom. On the cross of Calvary a man named Jesus of Nazareth gave up his life to free us from every scourge that would crush our spirits and bring us down to sub-human activity. “You have been set free . . .” writes St. Paul.

Do you know what that means?
**St. Paul uses the image of slavery**. Paul lived in a world where slavery was practiced on a widespread basis. Some people were enslaved because of military conquest. Others were enslaved because they could not pay their debts. But the people he was writing to knew the life of a slave to be a miserable one. Imagine living at the mercy of the whims of a master who, if he chose, could be cruel and vindictive--one who could whip you or banish you or even have you killed.
Of course, Paul himself knew what it was to be bound in chains while languishing in prison. You and I may have difficulty relating to slavery. Probably none of us will ever wear chains around our arms and legs. Although I did read an amusing story about one man, an artist named Trevor Corneliusien, 26, who discovered what that’s like. Remember Trevor is an artist. However, that does not mean he’s too bright. For you see, he decided one day to paint a portrait of his ankles as they would look bound in chains. Can you see that in your mind’s eye--a portrait of his ankles bound in chains? Seeking to make it as realistic as possible, Trevor obtained a heavy chain and a sturdy lock from a local hardware store and proceeded to bind himself as securely as if he were a prisoner. There was only one problem. When he was finished with his portrait, he couldn’t find the key to the lock. There was no way to take the chains off.
That wouldn’t have been that big of a deal had he been at home. But Trevor was camping in a remote area north of Baker, California--out in the middle of nowhere. It took him 12 hours to hop through the desert and reach a gas station for help. (2) Brilliant!
You and I will probably never have chains like that on us--unless we’re really clueless. But there are many people in our land who live as if they are bound with chains. I’m thinking of those who have become addicted to drugs or alcohol or tobacco or pornography or a host of other vices that have preyed on humanity since the dawn of time.
**A recovering alcoholic will tell you that the first step to overcoming an addiction is to acknowledge that addiction has taken you prisoner.** Addiction can be a terrible master.
Some of you are familiar with the so-called Darwin Awards, given to people who lose their lives doing something incredibly stupid. So often these tragedies are linked to drug or alcohol addiction. For example, in May of 2004 the manager of an apartment house in Austria was surprised to find the legs of a corpse sticking out of a window of one of his apartments. Police entered the apartment and found the deceased man’s head soaking in a sink full of hot water.
Apparently, this out-of-work Austrian had returned home after a night of drinking and drugs. He decided to slip in through the kitchen window. The window was fixed at the base and tilted out, giving him just enough room to squeeze his head through as far as the sink before he got stuck. While flailing around trying to escape, he somehow turned on the hot water tap.
Police are not sure why he didn’t simply turn off the water or pull the plug to allow the water to escape from the sink. Too high, I suppose. Of course, the real question is why he didn’t just enter the apartment through the front door, since police found the keys to his apartment in his pants pocket. But perhaps it’s not too surprising. People have been known to do incredibly dumb things under the influence of alcohol and drugs. (3)

As former football coach Lou Holtz once said, “I have never heard a successful man or woman get up and say, `I owe my success to drugs and alcohol.’ Yet I know of thousands of people,” Holtz continues, “that have ruined their lives because of drugs and alcohol.”

Of course, you can become addicted to a host of activities. I am beginning to wonder if some people are becoming addicted to their smart phones. That’s a rather benign addiction, I suppose. However, I understand that, in England, they’ve decided to try to protect smart phone addicts from themselves. They’ve begun establishing so-called “Safe Text” streets in London. One feature of these “Safe Text” streets is padded lampposts. You want to guess why the lampposts are padded? That’s right, to keep people from running into them while they are texting their friends. (4)

I may seem to be making light of a serious situation. I don’t mean to be. It’s important to understand that we can be addicted to a great many things. Some addictions can even be beneficial. For example, some people are addicted to exercise, which most of us could use more of.

Psychologist William Glasser wrote a book several years ago titled *Positive Addiction*. In his book, he notes how some people actually improve their lives through developing what he calls addictions to positive endeavors. For example, he believes a person who jogs one mile a day not only strengthens his heart and his lungs, but he increases his self-confidence and imaginative powers as well.

Though he uses language more suited to his time, this is basically what St. Paul is saying. In this passage Paul is saying we can be addicted to sin, which includes everything that would pull us down and keep us from being what God created us to be . . . or we can be addicted to God who will help us, if we will let Him, increase our sense of well-being and give us something wonderful to live for. That is the ultimate addiction-- being bound by chains of love to God.

**This is to say that there is no greater freedom in the world than the freedom that God gives through Jesus Christ.** Whether it is freedom from a debilitating habit or freedom to simply be the very best you can be, there is something about being connected to Christ that allows us to experience a richness to life that those without Christ will never experience.

Writer Steve Beard wrote an interesting column about the recent Nobel Prize winner and legendary folk/rock singer Bob Dylan shortly after Dylan was nominated for the Nobel Prize. He noted that, not too long ago *Rolling Stone* magazine asked Bob Dylan what song he wanted to hear on his death bed.

Dylan said, “How ’bout ‘Rock of Ages’?” Steve Beard thought it was fascinating that Dylan--the eccentric man that hippies christened as a prophet in the 1960s--still sings songs from his gospel albums.
Maybe we should not be surprised. A few years ago, Dylan was opening many of his concerts with the song “I Am the Man, Thomas.”

The song is about the conversation between Jesus Christ and Doubting Thomas. “Look at these nail scars here in my hands/They pierced me in the side, Thomas, I am the Man/They made me bear the cross, Thomas, I am the Man/They laid me in the tomb, Thomas, I am the Man/In three days I arose, Thomas, I am the Man.”

Some of you will remember that back in the 1970s Dylan was reportedly converted to Christ. His background is Judaism. But his spiritual path has taken him into an array of

philosophies and religions since then. Could it be, however, that through it all God really has a hold on Dylan and has never completely let him go?
Beard notes that in his recent concerts Dylan had been singing the song “Solid Rock” from his 1980 album *Saved*. In it, Dylan proclaims:

“For me He was chastised, for me He was hated/For me He was rejected by a world that He created . . . Well, I’m hangin’ on to a solid rock/Made before the foundation of the world/And I won’t let go, and I can’t let go, won’t let go.” (5)
That sounds like to me that way back in the background, in spite of his many experimentations, Dylan really is addicted to Jesus. That can happen to a person. Maybe it’s happened to you. Maybe at one time in life you were addicted to one of the many vices in this world that lure people and then trap them. But one day you met Jesus and he took the chains of addiction off and set you free--free to be a new person with a new heart and a new spirit.

Maybe you were bound by a different kind of addiction. Maybe you were bound by self- righteousness and a condemning spirit. Maybe Christ has set free that spirit in you to love and to be loved.
Whatever your situation, there is one who longs to take off any chains, even if it is simply the chains of a meaningless and self-centered preoccupation with your own needs. He wants to help you make a new start. He wants to be your Friend, your Ally as you seek to live an abundant life, filled to the brim with a joy that surpasses understanding.

Today is the day that can happen. Will you join your life to that of Christ? Then you will be able to say that glorious chant that we first heard from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: “Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, [I’m] free at last.” (6)
Let’s thank God for freedom this day, and let’s open our hearts to the One who gives us freedom in this world and the world to come. Amen

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1. Jim Davis, http://focusongod.com/Romans07.html.
2. *Uncle John’s Funniest Ever Bathroom Reader* (Bathroom Readers’ Institute).
3. *Kurier* (Austria). Cited in Wendy Northcutt, *The Darwin Awards 4: Intelligent Design* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2006), p. 75.
4. *Daily Mail*, 2008. *Uncle John’s Funniest Ever Bathroom Reader* (Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader). Portable Press. Kindle Edition.
5. http://www.breakpoint.org/component/content/article/71-features/1370-unlikely- witnesses.

6. Dr. King actually said “*We’re* free at last.” I took liberties to personalize the message.

III Fr Joseph Pellegrino

If today were not a Sunday, we would be celebrating the memorial of one of the Church Fathers, St Irenaeus. Irenaeus lived in the second century, about 130 to 203 AD. Among his writing, you will find the statement: *The Glory of God is man fully
alive.* Think about that: *The Glory of God is man fully alive*. What does this mean? Let's break it down. Glory is that which radiates from God, that which shows His Holiness. Therefore, the Holiness of God is radiated in man fully alive. To be fully alive is to be

alive both physically and spiritually, for we are spiritual beings as well as physical beings. Many people feel dead because they are dead. They live only for the physical and have sacrificed or refused to embrace their capacity for the spiritual. Man fully alive is more than physically alive. Man fully alive is spiritually alive. Therefore, to paraphrase Irenaeus' *The Glory of God is man fully alive;* we can say "The Holiness of God is seen in the man or woman who is totally, physically and spiritually alive.

It is in this light that we can come to an understanding of those demanding mandates at the beginning of this Sunday’s Gospel: Whoever loves Father or Mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not takes up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Recently, there has been a supposedly humorous commercial on TV that shows a teenage girl getting home at a reasonable time in the evening and her mother, who should have eaten a snickers bar, yelling at her, “What are you doing home? You should be out someplace disappointing your father.” The commercial is a joke, but, sadly, there are parents who try to convince their children to engage in actions that would destroy their spiritual lives. If they were to go along with their parents sinful demands, then they would be choosing the love of their parents over the love of
God. This is not all that rare. I have come upon parents, few to be sure, but still parents who encourage their children to sin. I have come upon parents who have told their Teenage daughters that they need to be on birth control because it would be reasonable for them to have sex. I have come upon parents who have taught their children to cheat at business, or work. But mostly, sadly, I have come upon parents who have taught their children to hate. They have done this by refusing to control their own anger and hating others. If a child were to choose to follow a parent leading her or him to sin, then that child would be loving Father or Mother more than God. The child would not be worthy of God, at least not until he or she rejects sin.

The second mandate really strikes us as excessive. It sure seems to be over the top to say, “Anyone who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of
me.” We hear this mandate, and we think about our children. Our hearts explode with love just picturing them in our minds. How can we be told that if we love them more than we love Jesus, we are not worthy of the Lord. How can this be? It is simply that Jesus Christ must be the center of our lives. We love our children because they are not just our children; they are the Lord's children. Parents are in the business of raising children for the Lord, not for themselves. If parents separate their love for their children from their love for the Lord, if the worship of God is not a priority in their home, if they let their children convince them that the Christian life is too demanding for modern day people, then these parents would be loving their son or daughter more than God. They would be unworthy of being a follower of Christ.

But if parents, or better, when parents, allow the presence of God in their homes to motivate their every action, when parents are committed to raising their children to be the Christian men and women the world craves to find its meaning and worth, then their

love for their children will reflect their love for the Lord. Catholic parents do not love their children more than they love God. Their love for their children is an expression of their love for God.

And finally, “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Christ’s love is sacrificial love. He loves by giving. He calls us to love by
giving. This can be difficult. This can be a real cross. A person can have a serious illness. There can be deep pain and division within a family, a person may experience a horrible life-changing tragedy. A person might be in so much pain that he or she just wants to give up, even to the point of going to war with God rather than accept his or her situation in life as a participation in the cross of Christ. If we refuse to follow the Lord because we are convinced that our crosses are too much for us, then we are not worthy of being called disciples of the Lord.

There is a popular expression, “If you have your health you have it all.” This is not true. What is true is this: “If you have the Lord, you have it all.”

And St. Paul wrote: “Do you not realize that when you were baptized you were baptized into the death of Christ, so that you can live the life of Christ.” Millions of Christians, billions of Christians, have died happy in the Lord because they have realized with their lives that nothing can ever separate them from the love of
Christ. They have been and are fully alive, physically and spiritually. The Glory of God has shown through them. Again, St. Irenaeus, “The Glory of God is man fully alive.”

May we also be fully alive.. May we be worthy followers of Jesus Christ III Fr Desiano

Nothing has shown us the social connections we have, and need, more than this Covid- 19 disease. This disease has forced us to fear, to keep afar, and to question every contact we could possibly make with another human being. One of the things most affected by our social confusion is what the scriptures speak about most clearly, hospitality.

How many times did I hear grandparents would not go near their grandchildren, and children would not bring their kids to see their grandparents? “I don’t want to be responsible for killing you,” people would say, showing just how much ultimate fear had become part of our daily discourse. We cannot begin to imagine a scene such as we have in the first reading, a prophet casually dropping in on a couple to eat until they end up building a bedroom for him to stay in.

Jesus sees hospitality as one of the fundamental ways in which faith is shared. He talks about receiving each other; to the extent that we receive others into relationship in faith, to that extent we receive the one who sent them. Ultimately, it is God who sends us into each other’s lives; ultimately when we receive each other in genuine openness and love, we are receiving God.

But, to be honest, Jesus doesn’t sound very hospitable with the opening lines of this passage—that unless we love Jesus more than our parents, more than our family, we cannot be his followers. We ask, “Why do we have to face a choice like this?” It gets clearer in the next lines. The one choice we have to make is whether to embrace Jesus and his way. When we do that, we will then know how to love everyone else in him.

It’s as if Jesus is saying that when we understand God’s infinite love for everyone, then we have the chance to understand how we are to view each other. God’s love binds us together, certainly as families, but also as friends and neighbors, also as members of a human community whose meaning becomes clear the more we see God’s love for each and all of us.

The passage from Paul’s letter shows the same thing from another angle. When we have completely identified with Christ, as we do when we are baptized, then we have died to the selfish, need-based way we usually live. Rather, in our new relationship with Christ, we find the power of his new life in our hearts, freeing us from the narrow vices that keep us from truly seeing each other.

The new life that Jesus offers us calls us to embrace each other as brothers and sisters. It’s hard to do this literally at this moment in our history, but maybe it’s clearer what this means. We now know how frail we are, how we depend on each other, and how we need to live as one human family—we know this better because of the turmoil of our present life. As Catholics, we gather to worship on behalf of all the human race. As God unifies us in Christ, so God is showing the unity that our very humanity cries out for and needs.

We who, because of our sacraments, know the power of our relationship with Christ, can uphold the importance of relationship, of hospitality, of acceptance in this broken and confused time. We have died with Christ, snuffing out the things that alienate and disunite us. We are invited to a table where God would feed us all as brothers and sisters. We, who have been visited not by a prophet but by the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, bring his transforming love into every relationship of our lives.