

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On this Fourth of July weekend it is worth considering that when immigrants receive citizenship, they must take the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America. The oath requires the new citizen to absolutely and entirely renounce allegiance and fidelity to any foreign power; to support and defend the country against all enemies; and to bear true faith and allegiance. The new citizen also promises to bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law. The oath concludes that they do all this without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion. In other words, citizenship requires total commitment to the United States of America.

If you've ever attended a Naturalization ceremony, you experience the joy, the elation, the pride that these newest members of our American family take in the citizenship that we born in this country take all-to-easily for granted.

In today's Gospel text Jesus gives us a more simplified yet challenging requirement for discipleship, our Christian citizenship, as it were. Discipleship requires total commitment to Christ.

In this requirement Jesus is not being anti-family. Rather when he spoke of loving father and mother, his audience heard a reference to their entire heritage as children of Abraham and Sarah, that is, their religious and social identity. So, when he speaks of loving parents more than him, he is saying, "If you only love what you know or those whom you know or what society has given you, it gets in the way of following me wholeheartedly. You are incapable of being my disciple."

"Likewise, if you see your children as your hope for the future, the promise that your influence will be prolonged beyond your lifetime, your hope is misplaced. You are incapable of being my disciple."

In short, Jesus is saying perhaps more radically than it's ever been said, "Get over yourself!" If you are going to be my disciple, it is not about you or yours. I must become first in your life."

Just as many of us born in this country take our citizenship for granted, so too do many of us who profess to be disciples take our Christianity for granted.

We hear something similar in Paul's message to the Romans, addressed to those who had recently chosen to be baptized. He's asking them why they chose to be baptized. Since most of us were carried as infants to the baptismal font, it's a question that perhaps we have never pondered. What difference has my baptism made in my life? How am I different from the "nones", that is, those who claim no religious identity, or agnostics, or even atheists? After all, most of us know good people who do not profess a religious faith yet outshine plenty of so-called believers, in kindness and generosity.

What would be different in your life if you had never been baptized? What would be harder? Or easier? More challenging? Or less burdensome?

St. Paul is telling the Romans that everything, absolutely everything, is different for those who have been baptized. He says that for those who do not know and follow Christ, death is the measure of all things, and everything comes to naught.

Paul is telling us that our Baptism permeates and needs to publicly transform our entire identity. It gives us the power “to live in newness of life” that is the power that raised Christ from the dead. This power enables us to think of ourselves as dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.

So, contrary to what the world tells us, both Christ and Paul are telling us that water, the water of our baptism, is thicker than blood. It renews our lives. It strengthens us to stand against evil. It calls us to promote justice. It demands us to abandon self-interest for the well-being of others. These are the requirements of discipleship, that is, Christian citizenship.

The Lord then advises that showing hospitality is the first step in Christian discipleship. He points out that even the smallest act of kindness, “a cup of cold water” to the least of his disciples promises eternal reward. Such simple generosity, he intimates, indicates openness to the message of the disciple. “He who receives you, receives me,” Jesus said. In the small act of kindness is the large act of receiving the Gospel of Christ.

There is a legend that speaks to this truth. It is about a famous monastery which had fallen on hard times. Its many buildings were once filled with young monks, the chapel resounded with the lilt of a beautiful choir, and people from far and wide came to pray and be spiritually nourished. Now it was all but deserted. No one came to visit. 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 to him, but whenever he appeared, the word would pass from monk to monk: “The Rabbi walks in the woods.”

One day the Abbot decided to visit the Rabbi and bare 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 crying their hearts out, the Rabbi raised his head and said, “You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts. You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give it to you, 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 was stunned, speechless. Then the Rabbi said, “Now you must go”. The Abbot left without ever looking back.

He returned to the monastery and in the morning called his monks together in the chapter room and told them that he had received a teaching from the Rabbi, which he would share with them, but that it was never to be spoken aloud again. 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 James 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? No, I’m too self-centered and selfish.” They were 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 certain reverence. They were gentle with one another. They looked out for each other and 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 is the first step in Christian discipleship when we start to see the face of Christ in one another.

Our commitment to Christ can separate us from even those whom we love. Christ brings peace, but it is a peace between God and humanity. It is not a guarantee that peace will always exist even between members of the same family. The mature disciple has to be aware 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. The disciple of Christ must always work toward peace, be prepared for conflict, but always keep a cold cup of water by the door of our hearts.