

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Rethinking Religion*
Service Theme: *Rethinking Devoted Commitment*
Sermon Theme: *Devoted Commitment Produces Devoted Comittment*
March 17, 2024— John 12:20-33

Religious sociologists often divide Christians into two categories: Committed Christians, and Cultural Christians. And I bet you could guess what differentiates the two. Committed Christians are active in their faith life. They regularly come to worship. They belong to, and are regular, active participants in a Christian congregation. They give of themselves—whether their time, talents, treasures, or all of the above-- to support the Gospel ministry of the church. They pray regularly. They read their Bibles regularly. Their faith is an important, primary part of their life.

On the other hand, Cultural Christians will say they're Christians, or that they believe in God. But they'll only occasionally join the family at church, like on Christmas, Easter, or Mother's Day, and they're not really interested in being involved in the church, or really practicing their faith in their life or at home. Their faith is an unimportant, secondary-- maybe even tertiary-- part of their life.

So, which one better describes you? Are you a Christian of devoted commitment? Or a Christian in name only? But for our purposes this morning, isn't it even more telling that on a Sunday when the service theme is about "devoted commitment," our first assumption is that it's going to be all about our devoted commitment to God?

That's typically how religion thinks about devoted commitment. That the primary glory is found in how devoted and committed we are to God, and how we show our commitment to God through our words, actions, and attitudes.

But this morning, as we rethink religion, and especially as we rethink devoted commitment, we need to rethink whose devoted commitment Christianity is really all about!

Today's Gospel takes place during Holy Week, sometime after Jesus' grand entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus and his disciples had gathered with hundreds of thousands of other Jews in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Festival. But along with the Jews, ***"there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival."*** These Greeks were likely what were called proselytes: Gentiles who had rejected the polytheistic religion of their people, and began to worship the monotheistic God of the Jews, but hadn't completely committed to taking steps, like circumcision, to fully convert to Judaism. These Greeks approached Jesus' disciple Philip, possibly because he had a Greek name, and made a simple request, ***"Sir, we would like to see Jesus."***

The request passed from Philip to Andrew, and then the two of them went together to bring it to Jesus. Given the circumstances, we might expect Jesus to launch into a speech about devoted commitment, crediting these proselytes for taking a few steps, but encouraging them to display their devoted commitment to God by going the whole way into a full conversion, doing and saying the things that would communicate full and devoted commitment to God. That's what religion would do, at least!

Instead, Jesus launches into a speech about devoted commitment—just not whose devoted commitment we might expect him to talk about. Whether the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus were even part of this conversation, we're not really sure. And ultimately it doesn't matter, because Jesus wants all people to focus on the devoted commitment that makes Christianity go-round!

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Interestingly, in John's Gospel account, probably 4-5 times prior, we find Jesus basically saying, "My time, or my hour has not yet come." But now, finally, Jesus' hour had come. What hour might that be? His hour for devoted commitment. His hour to be glorified! But

Jesus would do that not in the way religion typically thinks. Jesus would show devoted commitment and be glorified not by doing a bunch of really glorious acts for God, but rather by doing a truly humble, inglorious act—for the world, for us! Jesus explains, ***“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds...And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*** John adds the commentary note, ***“He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.”***

Jesus was going to be glorified—through his death. Through being lifted up on a cross! Jesus uses this analogy of the seed to explain how such a horrible, inglorious thing would glorify him. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never seen anyone hang a painting of a seed up in their home, or place a single seed as a display piece on their dinner table. But I’ve seen plenty of people who hang a picture of beautiful flowers on the wall, and I’ve seen plenty of people put a vase of flowers or a bowl of fruit in the middle of their dinner table. That’s because the true glory of a seed isn’t found in the seed itself, but in what it produces! Unless the seed “dies” to itself, being planted in the ground and sprouting into something else, producing fruit, or flowers, or trees, it can’t achieve its truest glory.

And neither could Jesus. Jesus knew that his greatest glory would come through his suffering and death. As the seed, it was necessary for him to be lifted up on the cross, to die, and to be placed in the ground, so that through his righteous life and his sacrificial death, he could pay for the sins of the world and ***“draw all people”*** to himself, reconnecting sinners to God! His greatest glory would come through the spiritual fruit and salvation that would be produced through his inglorious death.

Which leads us to an important question: To whom was Jesus showing devoted commitment through his death on the cross? To his heavenly Father, most certainly! Jesus willingly, devotedly carried out his Father’s eternal plan of salvation, and was committed to seeing it

through to the finish. And as Jesus told the Father, through his suffering and death, he also wanted the Father’s name to be glorified!

But Jesus’ willingness to face suffering, death, and the most excruciating torments of Hell, even though he, the sinless son of God was completely undeserving of it, shows his devoted commitment...to you! You were one on Jesus’ mind when he said he would be lifted up to draw all people to himself. You were one of the seeds that he knew needed to be produced by his glorious death. Jesus was willing to humble all of this, and suffer all of this, because he is devotedly committed to you, and your eternal salvation!

And Jesus’ devoted commitment to us needs to be the main focus and glory of the Christian Church and the Christian message! Because if it’s all about our devoted commitment to God, that’s not a very comforting, glorious message, is it?

Because whether you’d categorize yourself as a “Committed Christian” or a “Cultural Christian,” if we’re honest, we have to acknowledge just how uncommitted our “devoted commitment” usually is. Do God and your faith take the primary place in your life? Or are they lagging somewhere behind your finances, your family, your friends, and your fun? Are you really regular and active among God’s people, or in God’s house, or in God’s Word, or in God’s Gospel ministry? Or are you only committed to those things when the rest of your life leaves a little bit of margin? Or even if you’re the kind of Christian who is at every service, every study, and every opportunity to serve, do you always do it out of selfless love for your Savior? Or is your motivation sometimes so that you can look good to everyone else, or so that others will heap praise on you to feed your ego, or so that you can chalk up enough brownie points with God so he’ll bless you with all the things you want?

If the only glory of religion is our devoted commitment to God in our words, actions, and attitudes, then there’s not much glory to be found, is there? When Jesus tells us, ***“Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life,”*** do you deserve to keep your life? Or lose it?

But that's exactly why Jesus' devoted commitment to us needs to be the front and center, constant focus of the Christian church! Because Jesus' devoted commitment for you led him to submit to the cross. And on that cross, he paid the price for every one of the times when our commitment to God has been anything but committed.

Jesus' perfectly devoted commitment to us is what motivates and moves us to be more devoted in our commitment to God, because **Devoted Commitment Produces Devoted Commitment.** In any relationship, how much easier is to have devoted commitment to that person, if you know and have seen all the ways they're devoted in their commitment to you? That's the whole way God designed marriage—that husbands and wives would put each other first and themselves second in devoted commitment to the other—at the same time making it easier to be devoted and committed to your spouse, because you've seen and experienced their devoted commitment to you!

If you're married, you know how hard that can be. Having devoted, selfless commitment for your spouse can sometimes require hard, painful, and unpleasant sacrifices from you. It was the same for Jesus. That's why, in his humanity, he wrestled with the thought of the cross, as he said to his Father, ***“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”***

Likewise, having devoted commitment for God can be hard. It can require painful, difficult sacrifices from us. But like Jesus, we can be willing to suffer and sacrifice, because we know that through such devoted commitment to God and to each other, God is glorified, and his plans for us and through us are carried out. Devoted commitment is worth it, and we can have it, when we focus on and reflect on the devoted commitment that Christ showed for us, and still continues to have for us!

When you think about it, the request of those Greeks in our sermon text summary in four ways what it looks like to live a life of devoted commitment produced by Jesus' devoted commitment for us: ***“We would like to see Jesus.”*** Devoted commitment means ***“We would like***

to see Jesus” as he reveals himself to us in Word and Sacrament, in public and private worship, in large group, small group, or solo Bible Study. Devoted Commitment also means ***“We would like others to see Jesus,”*** as we carry out the Gospel ministry of the church, whether it be as a personal evangelist sharing Jesus with people in your life, or whether it be selling cotton candy at our Easter Festival that brings hundreds of people onto our campus to God-willing make Gospel connections, and future changes for people to see Jesus with us in his Word. Devoted Commitment also means ***“We would like others to see Jesus in us,”*** as we love our neighbor, as we care for their needs, as we comfort and encourage them in their losses and their fears, we're letting them see Jesus' love in us. And last, Devoted Commitment means ***“We would like to see Jesus as priority in our lives.”*** No matter what distracts or diverts or deludes our focus, keep Jesus as the number one priority in your life!

Whether people would call you a Committed Christian or a Cultural Christian, keep your focus on, and find your glory in Christ's devoted commitment to you, and it will impact your life, and your devoted commitment for him.