

## Religious Zeal

Religious zeal is not what you think it is. I title each of the sermons I write. The title for this sermon is “*Religious Zeal*” and as soon as I wrote those words I knew that it would not be understood. We have a very powerful Gospel from Matthew. In it Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” Well, that bothered me. You see I want to be a good Christian. I want to do what good Christians want to do. I want to learn about the bible. I want to be kind to others and do bible studies and read and say enough prayers to be a good Christian. **But** if those are really my hopes for my faith then I probably will get them and no more. If I do what good Christians do I probably would be able to say Lord, Lord, but I would have no relationship with God who has sought a relationship with me from the beginning.

I have been blessed by life in many ways. One way that I have been blessed is through the great example of my father, who has taught me and been present with me. My father has been, and is, an example of a man of faith who lives it out daily and it is seen in what he does, not just in the words he says. I have seen it throughout my life. My father acts out his faith. There are moments in life that define. When I was 7 or 8 we had a Chihuahua named Fi-fi. Fi-fi was a small dog. She never got over five pounds. One of the things that my parents told me not to do, and they said it many, many times, was to throw the ball in the house. “Chuck, don’t throw the ball in the house.” It was a Saturday morning and the rest of the family was doing other things. I was alone and I was throwing the baseball into my glove, over and over. Now Fi-fi was asleep on the couch. On one throw I missed the pocket and the ball skimmed over the top of my glove and hit Fi-fi in the head and Fi-fi died.

I had just killed Fi-fi. She didn’t move. I used both hands to pick her up and she was limp, her tail hanging on one side and her head off the other. I took her into my parent’s room and dad was working on something and I said, not wanting him to know that I was throwing the ball, “something is wrong with Fi-fi”. My father looked down at this little creature and took her from her from me. He laid her on the bed and realized that she was dead. He opened his mouth and put it over her head and breathed. After a moment she began to stir; she sat up. I remember that moment as a child watching this grown man care, watching him as he had compassion for this little animal.

After my father was ordained a priest we moved to a small southern town. Dad was the priest in charge of two small churches. It was in the early seventies and there was still anger over segregation. Indeed the small town was still segregated and racism was still strong. In the middle of town there was a hardware store, a drug store, a furniture store, a bank and not much else. Running through the town were railroad tracks. On a fall afternoon an old black man was crossing the railroad tracks in his car when he was struck by a train. The violence of the wreck threw him from his car head

first against the brick wall of the hardware store where he lay dying. Blood was coming from his ears and mouth and eyes. School was letting out and people gathered at the scene. Business men and women, children and ministers from the other churches in town stood at a safe distance and watched, as they waited for an ambulance to arrive. When my dad arrived, there stood a group of whites, in the middle of town, watching this old black man die. My father went to him and knelt down beside him and held his hand and prayed with him and he died. The sad part of this was that if he had stood and watched with everyone else no one would have thought less of him. Indeed, the opposite was the truth because he was criticized for what he did.

I want to be a good Christian. I want to learn and do. I want all the trappings of faith, but do I really want God to change me? Do I really want my life to be different because I know God and God knows me? Do I really want the people I know to be changed because of my relationship with God? In our world too often religion and faith are not connected. Too often it is easy to learn everything about religion and not have a relationship with God. Matthew's Gospel is about religion without faith. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock". In Matthew's gospel Jesus uses these two houses to remind us of God's call, not to the trappings of religion, but to a relationship with God that is faith, a faith acted out each day.

What a glorious building. We have everything that we need here. You can study God's word. You can come and hear God's word. You can worship God in this place. Your priests are here all dressed up in fine robes and there is beautiful music and gorgeous stained glass. But if this is where your faith resides then your house is built on sand. If you come here on Sundays and think you have done what you need to do to be a good Christian then you have missed it. You see all this, all that we are, the Eucharist we share, the music, the stained glass, this building, the programs offered are meant to point to one thing. All of this is meant to aim you at a relationship with God that changes who you are and propels you into the world to proclaim the risen Lord to those who do not know him. All of this is meant to enable you to act out your faith.

That is what I witnessed as my father knelt down next to a dying man to pray. How are you going to act out your faith today?