

Abdomen crunchers--is it just me, or are these things on sale everywhere you look? Exercise equipment tends to be trendy. People often switch from stationary bikes to rowing machines to NordicTraks to inline skates to abdomen crunchers thinking this piece of equipment--this is it! This will fit us for human compassion, great friends, and corporate leadership. The equipment is usually quite good, but there's always something they don't sell us, because they can't: determination, the will to use this product and change our habits. Even if they could sell determination, they wouldn't; it would only cut off future sales of trendy products. They count on us to invest in things we won't use so we'll try something else later on. It helps the economy. Underneath this tragic cycle lies something beautiful about us--we remain hopeful that someday we will find the thing that will open up new doors and bring order to our lives.

Many of us already find meaning in bigger things--the work we do, the persons we are, the relationships we keep. Many people work a job they hate under the boss from hell simply because it supports a family. When something organizes our life we can put up with frustrations. For most people that's family or a principle they believe in so strongly they gladly fight and suffer for the cause.

Jesus knew this. He knew people are happy when something grounds them. He wanted himself to be that foundation in the life of his disciples. So he told them in his speech on discipleship in Matthew's gospel, if you love parents or children more than me, you're not worthy. If you love yourself more than suffering, you're not worthy. We know from other places in the gospel that Jesus strongly valued love of parents and love of self. He surely did not suggest to the disciples that they abandon those other loves, but that they organize them under their love for him. Love for Jesus will govern love for family, self, and others.

Love brings conflict. We cannot please all the people we love; we always displease some of them. Sometimes we give ourselves completely to the wrong love. We become infatuated, overly attached to a possessive love which has good intentions, but cannot be the love which organizes the rest. The wrong love can suffocate someone and build estrangement and anger within us.

The true love of Jesus will bring order to our lives. Our neighbors will recognize in our parish community a people who put Christ first, a people who value family and faith because we value Christ. The trendy exercise equipment we buy is good; it's better than drugs. But having a sixpack stomach is not the goal toward which we make all our life's decisions. Christ is that goal. Good health, good looks, good friends, and family all belong on a firm foundation, our love of Christ.