

2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time A On Setting Priorities

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This year I have been participating in a program at the Archdiocese called Good Leaders, Good Shepherds. Even though I have been a pastor of a parish for a number of years, it is beneficial to participate in programs that help develop and fine tune our leadership skills. The topic on Friday focused on setting priorities and it began with a compelling little story to set the stage for the conversation. The story was about a parent and child walking on the beach. The child was enamored by all the sea shells and began to collect as many as he could, including the broken ones. As they were walking the parent and child noticed a starfish floating in the water a short distance from shore. The child of course wanted the starfish more than anything and ran out into the surf to obtain the prize. The parent watched as the child ran into the water toward the starfish and then run back to shore without the starfish, run out again towards the starfish and then run back to shore without the starfish. This happened several times. Finally the parent asked the child, "I thought you wanted the starfish, why haven't you come back with it?" To which the child replied, "I would love to bring back the starfish. It is just that I have all these shells still in my hands."

It is a good story. Of course, I love to beach comb with my mom and I prefer a good intact scallop shell to a stinky dead star fish any day of the week. However, the parable is a good one if you can get past that little detail. I really liked the story because it seems to articulate a basic human conundrum I think we all experience. The shells represent all the little things we have to do each and every day. The starfish represents our vocation or our ultimate concern in life. In order to pursue the starfish, we have to let go of some of the shells. That is another way of saying, you can't say yes unless you know how to say no. In the spirit life, this translates to, you can't say yes to God unless you can say no to lesser treasure.

I mention this because we can see this dynamic going on in the Gospel reading today. Ask yourself, what made St. John the Baptist great? Everything about John the Baptist points to Jesus. His ultimate concern is to testify with his life that Jesus is the Son of God. Because he said yes to that vocation, he was at liberty to say no to just about any other demand the world could place on him. He invites us to look at our life mission by the light of our baptism. This should shed light on our priorities. Same can be said of St. Paul. His ultimate concern was also to follow Jesus. He gives us his life mission statement in our second reading. He is called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. This allowed him to say no to his former way of life. This also gave him credibility in his letters when he asks us to examine our priorities.

And so, at the workshop on Friday they gave us a tool on how best to manage our priorities. The first step is: you have to define your starfish. What is your ultimate concern in

life? This will define what is important or not important. This will define what is urgent and not urgent. Do you follow? This week, you might try to write down your life mission statement in a single sentence. Once you have done this, you can then prayerfully look at it, consider St. John the Baptist, and decide if this mission statement reflects your baptism into Christ or if it needs to be tweaked a bit or changed altogether.

Once you have your mission statement, your starfish, you are ready to consider the shells in your hands. How you do this is draw a square on a piece of paper and divide it into four quadrants. The vertical axis on this square is urgent on top to not urgent on the bottom. The horizontal axis is important to the left and not important to the right. So, the first quadrant is where we write down our most urgent and important priorities. For us priests, things like sick calls, emergencies that pop up, our prayer life, mass and such show up in this first quadrant.

The second quadrant below it is where we placed the important but not urgent priorities. These are the things that are important to our mission but don't necessarily have to be done today, such as weekend homily preparations if it is a Monday, paperwork that has to be filled out, a letter that should be written, exercise perhaps and general health/wellness items, you get the picture.

The third top right quadrant deals with priorities that are not important however are urgent in the moment, the phone rings you feel you have to answer it, you are going through the email and you spend time answering less important emails because you feel the urgency to clear them from the in box, these kind of things. And below it is the fourth quadrant of things that are neither important nor urgent, such as web surfing, worrying about the 49er game (go hawks), and such. Once you have divided your priorities into these four quadrants, you can then prayerfully consider how much time of your day is spent on things that are not important or urgent. These are our seashells that, if we allow them to accumulate, will keep us from possessing our starfish. These are the areas we need to say no more often, (not all the time, just more often), so that we can yes to our mission. Does this make sense to you?

The priests at the seminar yesterday all agreed that the most difficult and devious quadrant to deal with is quadrant two. This quadrant again represents those priorities that are important to the mission but not urgent. For myself, I gave the example of homily prep for the weekend. This is very important to my mission however on Mondays this isn't urgent. Homily prep doesn't become urgent until Friday night or Saturday morning, so guess when I typically write my homilies! For me, the same thing happens with my taxes. Taxes are important to the mission because I need to be a law abiding citizen. Sitting down and doing my taxes typically doesn't happen until a week before they need to be in the mail because at that point, the priority has become urgent. Is anyone here the same way?

There are other things in this quadrant too we priests identified and I think you may be able to identify with as well. Being healthy physically and eating right is important for the mission but not considered to be urgent, in that we don't feel like it has to start happening today and days add up. You see, I have had this in my second quadrant for years and all you have to do is look at me to see how urgent this important priority is for me. This was a good challenge for me yesterday because if something is important but not considered urgent, this priority might not be attended to for decades, or God forbid, until the matter becomes urgent because of a trip to the hospital, something I see often on my weekly sick calls. How does this relate to the spirit life?

I believe when it comes to the spirit life, many of us have our relationship with God as a central aspect to our life's mission statement. However, as a pastor, it is very clear to me that many of us place items like prayer, going to Church regularly, spiritual reading, availing ourselves to the sacraments, and taking time for contemplation as quadrant two items, things that are important but not urgent, and so we never make time for them. Items like building up our family's faith life, working on the health of our marriages, eating together as a family, caring to the spiritual needs of our children, looking out for the poor, overcoming an addiction, all of these things we would all identify as important, but perhaps not urgent in that we keep thinking, "well, I can work on that next week", right?

The trouble is, after years of doing this, our lives can become a wreck and we are left clueless wondering why. It seems that every week I am working with a family in the parish that is falling apart precisely because of a quadrant two priority not being attended to, sometimes for years. The carnage could have been prevented by a value everyone understood as important but was not considered urgent until it is time to call the priest. Now the value has become urgent and important, leaving everyone praying, "my God I hope it isn't too late". Catch my drift?

And so the presenter at our seminar on Friday challenged us to learn how to calendar quadrant two items every day. The presenter said if we are ever going to start exercising, it has to be calendared. He looked straight at me when he said that. It was a little embarrassing. It is true however, so I need to prayerfully consider this. By the same token, however, if we want to have a deeper relationship with God, stronger families, better marriages, and a deeper prayer life, these things have to be calendared in as well, each and every day. We may need to cut down a little on some of the quadrant four items: things that are neither urgent nor important like internet surfing, potato couching, and such. We need to learn how to say no to the more unimportant things in life so to say yes to the things that define who we are, that point to our life mission statement.

You see my friends, St. John the Baptist appears on the scene and everything about his life points to Jesus. He said no to a lot of things in life so to say yes to that one vocation. He challenges us to look at our life by the light of our baptism and relationship with the Lord. This week we are challenged to look at our life mission statement in light of our baptism. We are challenged to look at our priorities, where are we saying yes and where are we saying no? What is your starfish? What are the shells that need to be let go. The invitation is to articulate this in your day planner and try it for a week. With effort, weeks can turn into years. St. Paul, after all, encourages us that by our baptism we have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy. The trouble is, as we know, there are only so many hours in a day. This forces us to make priorities. The secret is to make good ones.