

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

John 12:1-8

We in the church focus all too often on the wrong things, both in our life together as a community or family of believers, and in our lives as individuals within the larger world. And I think people's grouchiness in the church and at home, are a result of this wrong focus.

That seems to be what the problem is with Judas in today's Gospel reading, and that seems to be the problem with many other people today. If we focus on what other people are doing, or not doing, to make things work the way we think they should work; if we focus on the problems that we have as a church, or the problems that we have as individuals, that will not fix the problem. It will just make us feel aggravated, anxious and resentful. We need to do much more than focus on the problems we have. We need to focus on the solutions. For us in the church, and indeed for us as we go beyond the church, we need to focus on spiritual growth and nurture. If we are focussed on that, everything else will fall into place.

We can get so busy within the church going to meetings and worrying about money and about human resources that the "main thing" gets lost and our behaviour, our words and actions, can end up working against the main thing instead of for it. And outside the church, in our homes, the main thing is often virtually invisible. We not only don't walk the walk, we often don't even talk the talk, reserving it all, as it were, to Sunday worship.

Think about it. We talk more about where we are going in life than we do on seeking the mind of Christ and asking Him what we should be about. We worry more about how our children and grandchildren will do in sports, than we do on whether or not they will grow up to be people who know the Lord and His love in their lives, and are able to show that love to others. Our young people most certainly should be encouraged to excel in physical things, while at the same time learning to live a deeply spiritual life. The question is, what is the main thing in our lives? What do we give priority to as part of the church of Jesus Christ, and as individuals when we go home afterward?

The past is not what is important, nor is what lies to either side of us, those things that can cause us to run off in all directions at once. The goal is what is important, and following the course that gets us there. For many of us, our hopes and dreams in life centre around our jobs. That's not surprising. That's where we spend most of our time. Our jobs give us the resources for achieving our goals in life. It is natural that we should have dreams concerning our work.

Research shows, however, that around age forty-five, those dreams begin to change. That is why some men in the middle years of life, when they ought to be in their prime, become somewhat listless and begin feeling tired all the time. The problem is not physical. It's spiritual. They've lost their dream.

Meanwhile, women who have spent most of their adult lives as care givers, are beginning to taste freedom for the first time. So while their husbands are winding down, many wives are thinking about going back to school, or starting their own business. They are excited. They bubble over with possibilities. How we feel about life is related to our sense of purpose, to what we consider the main thing. How the church, how we,

manage to deal with our problems also relates to our focus, to what we exert our efforts towards. Five simple things can help us discipline our spiritual life and bring us closer to winning the prize of our calling in God. Five things can help us meet our problems as a church, and as individuals, from an entirely new angle, an angle that focuses not on the problems, but on the great problem solver, God.

First - Recognize our strengths and virtues, but resist being satisfied with where we are in life. There is nothing positive in thinking that we are not good enough to live our dreams. But there is danger in being satisfied with the degree of goodness and closeness we have with God today. God can always make us more like Christ than we are right now.

Second - Accept the need to work and struggle spiritually. Salvation is a free gift. But a vital, intimate relationship with God does not come effortlessly. No relationship does. Athletes know their abilities. They also know that they must work to keep those abilities up to snuff, let alone to improve them.

Third - Study the Bible - especially the Gospels. We can't be more like Christ if we don't really know what He was like.

Meditate on how the scriptures show Jesus dealing with life.

Pay attention to His priorities, to His conflicts, to His actions, and to His teachings. Let these things be used by God in our life to challenge our thinking, to test how we do things. Every athlete studies the techniques of those who are better than him or her, so that they might improve themselves.

Fourth - Continue in prayer. Acknowledge our failures and open our life to the transforming power of God. Don't forget to listen, as well as to talk. In prayer, face the reality of whose we are, and learn to submit ourselves to God's purpose for us. Let Him show us the direction we should run in, the path we should

take. Athletes have their coaches to show them what to do and how to go about doing it. They don't ignore them. Nor should we ignore ours.

And Fifth - Don't fear change, change is the name of the game.

We need to change. When we are open to God, not only will we change, but things around us will change. Growth is a process of changing, and that process is not always pain free.

There are some things we will have to give up. There are some people who will turn on us. Let it happen. What we will receive in their place is far better.

What we regard today in the church, and in our personal lives, as a problem, is really an opportunity, a challenge; an opportunity to ask what our main thing is, and a challenge to work towards it. May God bless us in the meeting of that challenge.

AMEN.