

When I was on USS America, the command Chaplain, Chaplain Tim Johns, was the department head and I was the Division Officer, in charge of 13 spaces, religious programs and supervising two enlisted personnel, religious program specialists, or “RPs” as we called them: RP1 Pacheco and RPSN Adam Sumner.

In addition to my priestly duties, as division officer I was supposed to make sure the enlisted are studying and preparing for their advancement exams to be promoted. The first year, I really didn’t know what I was doing, and RPSN Sumner scored low on his advancement exam. I felt terrible, because my lack of knowhow was affecting his future. I realized I needed to learn how to help him be successful. I asked a Chief from the Admin department to help Sumner prepare. Of course, many times, I and Chaplain Johns had to remind him to take time to study. I made my RPs work hard, study hard and know their stuff. Chief Peters was very effective, he had RPSN Sumner basically teach him how to be an RP. After that approach, RPSN was promoted twice in two years and advanced to the rank of 2nd class petty officer. Years later, Chaplain Tim Miller joined the team at the Naval Academy. He told me he had worked with RP2 Sumner and said he was “one of the best RPs he had worked with.” I felt like a proud dad.

One thing this taught me was that, although the RPs worked for me, I also was supposed to work for them – to help them succeed. Their success IS my success. Their ability to do their job effectively, made the ship successful. Without everyone doing their job, the ship would fail her mission.

How often do we think that possessions belong to us, that we are our own masters, that our success is something we have done ourselves? But the truth is NOTHING belongs to us, really. NO success is purely mine. Without a long line of people who supported me --

- my parents who fed, clothed and raised me,
- the numerous teachers that patiently taught me,
- the classmates who studied alongside me,
- various mentors that challenged me,
- coworkers, bosses, people that cleaned up after me,

- Police, firefighters and all who kept me safe day to day, etc. etc. etc.,

I would not be who I am. Life is a Team Sport.

And if I go to the spiritual side – I think of those who taught me religion, those who taught me to pray, my spiritual director Sr. Marcy, and the priests that gave me sacraments weekly, forgave my many sins, and gave me the example of broken men called to strive for holiness.

And if I go even deeper -- Where did my intellectual abilities come from? Where did inspirations to pray or become a Youth Minister or enter seminary come from? Where does the air I breathe and earth I stand on come from?

As God said to Job, when he felt important enough to challenge God's plan:

*"Where were you when I founded the earth?...
Who determined its size? Surely you know?
Who stretched out the measuring line for it?
Into what were its pedestals sunk,
and who laid its cornerstone,
Who shut within doors the sea,
When I set limits for it and fastened the bar of its door,
And said: Thus far shall you come but no farther,
and here shall your proud waves stop? (Job 38)*

In reality, we are not creators of any of this -- the Planets, the Stars, the subatomic particles: quarks and muons and bosons – IT IS ALL GIFT. (repeat)

The parish staff had a retreat afternoon on Thursday, and the presenter said that right after she had given birth to her daughter, her husband cut the umbilical cord and said to his wife, "This child does not belong to us. She belongs to God." Now, husbands, I don't recommend telling your wife after hours of labor, that the child doesn't belong to you two, but you get my drift. Our children are gifts from God, we are blessed to have them. We may have had a fun part in their creation, we may feed and clothe and raise them, but we do not put breath into their lungs, make their hearts beat, or infuse them with their many talents and abilities. ALL THIS IS GIFT from God above.

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, reflects on the fact that the substances of this life are fleeting. All is Vanity. We can invest in the things of earth and when we die, which we all will one day, we leave all our accomplishments, wealth, businesses to the next person who may totally dismantle them all. Which asks the question – if much of this world is fleeting, what do I focus on? What is truly important?

The Rich man in the Gospel thinks that his main goal is to “rest, eat, drink and be merry.” He uses all his resources for these goals. Those are all good things, but should they be the main goals? Jesus challenges us, What kind of treasure are we storing up?

St. Paul tells the Colossians what to focus on: “*seek what is above... not of what is on earth.*”

St. Paul uses the image of taking off the old self and putting on the new self. Kinda like changing a set of clothes. Instead of wearing the dirty, sweaty clothes from working out or sports or doing landscaping like the Eagles scouts -- take off the old, dirty, grimy clothes (sins) that we can tend to fall into, put them in the hamper, take a shower (baptism and Confession), and put on the new, clean set of clothes (virtuous actions).

That’s how we are to live – to seek what is above. Store up treasure in Heaven.

How do we do that? St. Paul says “*Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry. Stop lying to one another.*”

We don’t have to be bound by this world. We are to die to this world and live for Heaven. Instead of immorality – live a prayer-filled, holy life, following the moral code of the Church. Instead of impurity and lust and evil desire – live purely, with true love for self and others. Treating them with dignity and respect. Avoiding things that trigger those base desires.

Instead of Greed, like the rich man in the Gospel --- live generously – Give, Give, Give. Time, talent, treasure. Build habits of virtue – honesty, integrity, courtesy, kindness.

Instead of focusing on “things” – focus on the people in our lives and encouraging them and treating them well. Instead of seeing employees as “mine,” see them as God’s Children and work for their well-being, (like RPSN Sumner.)

Instead of seeing children as belonging to us, see them as Gifts God had loaned us for a time, and we are to do our best to raise faithful Adults. To raise them to be followers of Jesus. To raise them first to be holy.

“Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given besides”
(Matthew 6:33)

God will never be outdone in generosity. After all, he did not even hold back his own son. He gave him freely to save us. We are to give our children back to God. They need to know that they belong to him.

Whatever our profession, whatever our income, whatever our possessions and wealth and abilities – we are called to “seek what is above” to put our gifts and talents at the service of the Gospel.

This week let us evaluate how well we are doing:

- How much treasure are we storing up on earth?
- How much treasure are we storing in Heaven?
- What are the truly important things in our lives?
- When was the last time we got on our knees and thanked God for these gifts?
- And given this, what do we need to change this week?