

2nd Sunday of Lent
March 20, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

The Right Focus

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7
Psalm 51
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

Having the “right focus” is extremely important. In fact, it is so important that it affects *every* aspect of life. For example, we find it in sports. When I was the assistant pastor of Immaculate Conception parish in North Little Rock, I would often play golf with parishioners on my day off. One week, as I prepared to tee off, one of the guys said, “Don’t hook the ball into those houses on the left!” The left side of the fairway was lined with nice-looking homes. One home had a garage that faced the tee box and there was a woman sitting on a lawn chair in it. As I lined up my shot, I kept saying over and over in my head, “Don’t hook the ball into that lady... don’t hook the ball into that lady...”

Milliseconds after the ball left the face of my club I knew that the woman’s life was in danger. I yelled, “Fore!” only to have her turn in the direction of the danger. The ball missed her by inches and began ricocheting around in her garage. Thankfully, the woman was not hurt. My pride was, though, and the guys reminded me about it for months! Coaches frequently remind their athletes of the importance of focusing on success rather than on failure. Having the right focus can be the difference between a horrible shot and the perfect one. The truth of this reality is so important that it has been applied to the business world in a principle called, “Appreciative Inquiry.”

Sue Hammond, in her book on Appreciative Inquiry, explains how modern research on the human brain has found that the brain does not hear the word, “not.” She explains, “When I say, “Don’t think of elephants,” your brain only hears ‘Think of elephants.’”¹ The process of Appreciative Inquiry applies this reality to the business world. Instead of companies doing evaluations as they have in the past—focusing on what is “wrong,” and trying to come up with solutions—appreciative inquiry focuses on what is being done right with the purpose of doing more of those particular things.

We find this same principle in the sport of motorcycling. It’s referred to as, “You go where you look.” A motorcycle tends to steer in the direction that the rider is looking. Therefore, obstacles can become dangerous when a rider fixates his or her attention on them. Instead, riders have to practice fixating on the safest solution around an obstacle. In other words, if there is a chunk of debris in the road, the tendency is going to be for the rider to focus on it and, therefore, steer right into it. Instead, it is essential for the rider to look away from the debris to a clear path around the obstacle.

All of these examples just reinforce the importance of our having the right focus and they give us some insight into the healing of habitual sin. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, we’ve been looking at habitual sin, attachments, and addictions. All of us are addicted to something, but it differs from person to person. In order to be healed of our addictions, we need to have the right focus.

¹ Hammond, Sue Annis. The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry, 2nd Edition, 1998, pg. 30.

Most of us try to overcome habitual sin, attachments, and addictions by focusing on them. We ruminate about their presence in our lives and the negative affects they bring. We often become preoccupied with them. In doing so, we tell ourselves, “Don’t do that!” The brain, however, simply hears, “Do that!” It seems that the more we focus on stopping habitual sins, the more we commit them! We begin going through a whole list of possible remedies for our habitual sin. With each one of them, we willfully, forcefully apply them to our struggles, determined to conquer our sin. Yet, with each one, we fail and fall deeper into despair. In order to reverse this cycle, we need to shift our focus.

In numerous places in the New Testament, we are challenged to focus on what is most important. For example, in Paul’s letter to the Colossians he instructed them to, “Think of what is above, not of what is on earth” (Colossians 3:2). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “We look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). So what is unseen and eternal? God! We are invited to keep our focus on God rather than on our sinfulness!

Usually, after we have tried every possible “remedy” for conquering our habitual sin, we turn to God. At first, this will have no affect on our sin. We will continue to struggle with it, often feeling guilty and hypocritical. The reason why our initial turning to God usually doesn’t work is because we haven’t *truly* surrendered to God. Instead, we have treated Him like yet another “remedy” for our willfully conquering our sin. In other words, we move from being in slavery *without* acknowledging God, to being in slavery *while* acknowledging God.

At this stage, we spend a lot of time in prayer, but it is focused more on overcoming habitual sin than on deepening our relationship with God. When our prayer is focused on sin, we will continue to sin. Prayer that leads to healing requires us to surrender our willfulness, to gently and humbly accept our sinfulness, and focus our attention simply on deepening our relationship with God.

By focusing on developing our relationship with God we come to know His unconditional love for us. We come to know ourselves to be loved sinners, cherished by God beyond imagining! We grow in awareness that the healing of our habitual sin is *God’s* work, not our work. We are simply called to be open to it. We surrender our willfulness and live in hope rather than in despair. Without even thinking about it, we find ourselves growing in healing and freedom.

As you can imagine, the temptation throughout the healing process is always *willfulness*. Willfulness is more than our cooperating with God’s grace; it is our turning our attention away from God and back onto ourselves and our own solutions. There is something deeply ingrained in our humanity that wants to fix things, including our sinfulness. Maintaining the right focus requires a certain amount of discernment. It requires us to be aware of the times when our focus on God has regressed back into using God as a “remedy” for our struggles. During such times, we must gently and humbly re-focus on what is important, our relationship with God. If having the right focus can transform sports and business, imagine what it can do in our spiritual lives!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ The usual process of healing that Christians experience is “Slavery *without* acknowledging God,” to “Slavery *while* acknowledge God,” to “Freedom *with* God.” What stage are you at in your own struggle with habitual sin? Share with God your frustrations, fears, hopes, and desires regarding His healing.