

Last Sunday as we began the Advent season we reflected on author Steven Covey’s well known maxim: ***The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.*** Today I want to continue to explore this idea through the person and ministry of John the Baptist.

Scripture scholars tell us John’s public ministry of “preparing the way of the Lord” may have lasted only for three months before his direct challenge to the political and religious authorities, particularly King Herod, ended in his arrest and martyrdom. But for thirty years John’s life had been leading up to this short period of ninety days during which he would build a path for the Messiah.

John was a person whose life modeled Steven Covey’s maxim “the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” For John this is summarized in one word—***repent.*** But just what is repentance? And how does repentance help us to keep the main thing—for us Jesus and the Kingdom of God—the main thing?

First, repentance means deliberately choosing to place God and God’s Kingdom through relationship with Jesus as the first love, the center of my life. It means relinquishing my ego, the temptation to place self above everyone and everything else. Some months ago I stated that ego can be defined by using its three letters EGO as representing all of the ways I Edge God Out. For example, how many “I” statements do I employ when speaking about my life; my life’s work? Do I always make sure that the spotlight, the credit, shines on me and me alone? John the Baptist testifies in today’s Gospel that he is “not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of the sandals” of the one about whom he speaks, whose way he is preparing. John’s way of life and his preaching points that the way we “keep the main thing the main thing” –the way to God, to Jesus, is through humility—a right understanding of myself and my place in the wider order of the world and God’s kingdom.

Second, repentance lived through humility leads us, like John to “make the main thing the main thing” through a wholehearted offering of our lives to God through Jesus. John said that he must first decrease so that Christ might increase. He calls us to do the

same. Here is where daily prayer, reading and reflection on the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, as I spoke about it last weekend comes in to play.

Third, after steps one and two, repentance is experienced through personally taking up the invitation to change the direction of our lives that run contrary to the path laid out by Jesus. More than compiling a list of sins, which like symptoms of a disease while helpful, we must choose to go deeper, look beyond the symptoms and search for the underlying issues, ask fundamental questions: *Just who, or what, is the main thing, the main relationship of my life? Are my attitudes, values, the investments of my time, energy, money, relationships truly helping or guiding me to the “main thing” or “main relationship” of my life, my outwardly professed faith in Jesus membership and committed involvement in the church? If not, what changes need to be made? What steps do I need to take to alter the path of my life, to make crooked ways straighter? Is Jesus truly “Lord of my life?”* A sincere celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Penance is most helpful in our choosing the path of repentance. Laying bare our soul before Jesus the Divine Physician through the ministry of the priest offers us the medicine of divine mercy. Entering into the sacrament of Penance is both an act of humility and a first step on the path to new or renewed spiritual health. We need not be afraid. St. Peter reminds us today God is not harsh, but full of patience towards us. If it has been years, or even decades, since you last went to Confession, consider this your invitation from the Lord who is waiting to heal you.

Finally, repentance is about giving witness to others. John set his life on a path of pointing out the straight way to others, helping them to see and keep the “main thing the main thing”, calls us to do the same. John calls us to be beside one another—building paths for each other and at the same time allowing Christ to increase. Our repentance, our prayer, our study of the Scriptures, our participation in the sacraments, our lives of Christian witness—all of these can make of each of us other John the Baptists preparing the way of the Lord Jesus.

Fr. Jim Secora