

- As Christians we are called to be followers or students of Jesus Christ. Church people call it Discipleship.
 - But, if you grew up in church, or have been around it for any amount of time faith can begin to feel like a trip without any direction, no mile markers, no end in sight.
 - Because churches are famous for needlessly nagging parishioners with guilt and threats and fundraisers.
 - At yet, at another level, an intellectual level, a spiritual level, at the level of our minds and heart we really aren't being asked for anything. Nothing that matters or adds value to our lives.
 - A trip without any direction, no mile markers, no end in sight.

- Discipleship **is** about following Jesus Christ.
 - It's a journey. And every journey is made up of steps. Like the journey the disciples are on with Jesus in today's Gospel
 - Because, it turns out, successful discipleship all comes down to simple steps, simple, but **not easy**.
 - Over the past few years we have identified specific STEPS, life style choices that are essential to growing and strengthening our faith.
 - In order to grow in a relationship with Christ, a relationship in which Christ can comfort, support and guide us but also challenge, change, and transform us, these STEPS are all important to take.

- I said it last week and I'm gonna' say it again: The steps we're talking about are **NOT OBLIGATIONS**. They're opportunities, openings to the love and mercy of the Lord.
 - As soon as we look at them as mere obligations, we weaken their potential effectiveness. Neither are they simply more to do: none of you need more to do.
 - The steps we're talking about are aimed at simplifying life rather than complicating it.
- STEPS is an acronym
 - S is **serving** in a ministry or on missions. Jesus called Himself a servant and that's what He wants His followers to be as He makes expressly clear in today's Gospel.
 - T is **tithing and giving**. God is generous. God is a giver and we can use our money to become more like God .
 - E is **engaging** which is about small groups, like our Connect Groups. Faith is **always personal** but it is **never private**. It needs to be lived out in a community of people who support one another.
 - P is **practicing** prayer and the sacraments.
 - S lastly is **sharing** our faith. Our faith actually grows as we share this message with others.
- The steps are not necessarily taken in any particular order so neither will our series.

- Today we're talking about P: practicing prayer and the sacraments.
 - That it's an important step of faith probably doesn't shock you.
 - But here is what might surprise you: you may be praying wrong. That can sound a bit offensive.
 - Is there really a right and a wrong way to pray? There is.

- To help us understand that, we are to turn to the letter of James we heard in our second reading.
 - The letter of James was written by a relative of Jesus named James, as advice to help all Christians grow in faith and spiritual maturity.
 - We're looking at the 4th chapter where James asks this very poignant question: *Where do the wars and conflicts among you come from?* (James 4.1)
 - It's a pretty good question. Why are there wars between nations? Why are there wars in our families? At work?
 - The news is full of conflicts that rage out in the wider world, but it isn't just out there, maybe it was in your house this weekend, or even your car this morning.

- Why does there have to be all this fighting?
 - Perhaps conflict comes from a lack of resources or boundaries: if your kids each had their own room they wouldn't fight.

- Perhaps it comes from a lack of proper communication: if Lucy and Ricky would just listen to one another the marriage could actually work.
- Perhaps it comes from ideology: Democrats want this but Republicans want that.

- But, really, when you think about it, those are just contributing factors to the real problem. James says: *Is it not from your passions that make war? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain.* (James 4.2-3)
 - By “passions” James means, collectively, all the ways in which we want more.
 - There is this disordered part in all of us that wants what we want, when we want it. We can be envious and selfish.
 - There is conflict on the outside because there is a war in the inside.

- And this is where prayer enters the picture. James says,
 - *You do not possess because you do not ask.* (James 4.2)
 - Asking is about prayer. Sometimes we don’t have because we don’t pray about it. How often does that happen?
 - When I come across a problem, I immediately begin to think about how **I** can fix it, what I can do. I waste no time in getting annoyed and angry with others, but rarely, unless it’s something huge, do I stop to pray about the situation.

- We want something, we need something and we never even ask.

Or ... perhaps you're saying, "Oh no, Father Rob. I did ask but I did not get what I wanted."

- James has an answer here, as well: *You do ask but do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* (James 4.3)
 - Do you know why God answers some of our prayers with a resounding "**no**"? James says we're praying for the wrong things, foolish or selfish things.
 - In prayer, of course, we bring our needs to God.
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- And if we ask as God teaches us to ask, we'll receive a positive response. the \$64,000 question becomes: How do we do that?
 - In the letter of James just after the section we read, James gives us a very simple explanation, again, simple but not easy.
 - *Submit yourselves to God.* (James 4:7)
 - The meaning of the term in the original Greek was a military term in which one military force aligned itself with another military force of far greater power and authority.
 - It was a strategic decision on the part of the smaller, weaker force aimed at success and victory.
 - Prayer is like that. When we pray in a way in which we are submitting to God, a Force of greater power and authority, we make a strategic decision aimed at success and victory.

- Then James comes to the main point of prayer: *Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.* (James 4.8)
 - The point of prayer is not about getting what we want, or manipulating God to give us what we want. The point of prayer is drawing closer to God.
 - So we can hear His voice and follow Him.

- Then James takes it even further, *Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.* (James 4:10)
 - Go to God with a humble heart.
 - Pray in a manner in which you confess that God is God and you're not ... and God will exalt you.
 - Approach God in prayer with a humble heart
 - And you submit to him.
 - That's why kneeling is a great posture for prayer.
 - Use your needs and wants, those areas in my life where I am not self-sufficient, where I can't do it on my own, to draw closer to God.
 - It's a life-long lesson to learn.
 - It is a lifestyle choice to keep meeting God in prayer.

- And when you commit to that lifestyle choice, I guarantee you that you will experience a significant reduction in unhealthy conflict in your life.

- So how do we get better at prayer? How do we pray so that we grow our in a relationship with Christ?
 - First, you have to practice it. There is a certain irony about the analogy I am going to use next but it's too perfect not to use, no matter how embarrassing.
 - Prayer is just like working out.
 - Do it rarely and its difficult. As a result, you're probably not going to be any good at it, anyway.
 - So, as a result of that, you don't like it.
 - So, as a result of all that, you do it even less. It's a strong image because the ones who need it most (read **ME**), do it least and for all of us, those times when we need it most, we feel least like doing it.
 - When it comes to prayer, it is helpful to understand that most of us are beginners, the majority of Christians remain beginners, and that's OK.
 - Acknowledging that will help keep us from becoming discouraged or impatient with our efforts.
 - Second, you need a plan to practice.
 - You need content. You need something to pray, something to say. Without content you start thinking about the Ravens or the Redskins. (Thinking about the Steelers is always sinful). Or, like me, you start thinking about what you had for lunch or what you're going to have for dinner - and, if it's a really long prayer session, what you're going to have for breakfast tomorrow.

- We need content that focuses us on Jesus Christ rather than ourselves.
 - Reflections on the daily or weekly readings are an excellent place to start. There are many such as the Word Among Us that are a great way to keep focused on Christ and His message.
 - I’m so very grateful for the generosity of the publishers which provides free copies of Word Among Us, their monthly magazine.
- We just started a weekly e-mail, which we call a “devotional.” A “devotional” is a specific spiritual practice or scriptural reading.
 - We’re calling ours Worship Fully because that is what we are called to do and what we hope it will help you to do.
 - It will come out each Friday with the readings for the coming Sunday, an introduction to our message series if we’re in one and also a summary of the particular message for that weekend.
 - It will also include the Mass intentions and the intercessions so you can get a better handle on who we are praying for and with.
 - And it’s free! We’ll automatically send to it to you every week. If you know of someone else you would like us to send it to, please let us know.

- We're also using our Facebook page and Twitter accounts to help in these areas as well.

- Third, identify a regular time and place to practice.
 - For your daily quiet time, find a time that works best for you. If you're a morning person, like me, do it first thing in the morning.
 - If you're not a morning person, if you are no fun to be around in the morning - if even Jesus doesn't want to be around you in the morning - then find a different time that works for you, a time when you can bring the most energy and apply yourself best.

- Next, determine a place - a place where you can go and be alone with God. As you keep going to that place, whether it's a favorite chair at home, in your car, or somewhere quiet in your office, it will actually become a more sacred and holy place.

- Then there is your weekly worship here at Mass, in which we receive the Word of God as He gives himself to us in Scripture and in Holy Communion. And your regular reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation in which we receive directly the Mercy and Love of God as well.

- Weekly worship is going to be far richer and rewarding, it's going to be the nourishment and encouragement it's meant to be if it's matched with that daily quiet time.
 - In turn, the Eucharist can be the source and summit of a life lived with prayer. Reconciliation can be a joyful encounter with Christ, maybe you'll even laugh a little!
 - We often think of prayer as a good thing to do, but not essential, except in times of emergency.
 - Prayer is, in fact, the game changer when it comes to the better you you're aiming at... the one increasingly free from anger and pride, and war and conflict, because you're bringing that stuff to God instead of to your other relationships.
 - Prayer is essential if we're to win the war inside us, submit to God and grow as disciples.
- Discipleship is simply following the Lord, step by step.
 - Discipleship is simply following the Lord, step by step, again, simple but not easy. But it's not impossible, either.
 - It's not about perfection but about proximity, closeness to the Lord; it's not about sainthood but about striving, even haltingly, towards sanctity, holiness.
 - Its following the Lord step by step... A little bit more today than yesterday ... A little bit more tomorrow than today
 - And in the process our life is simply more successful. The steps are steps to life change.