

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last July when my niece Julie and her husband were both away from home for a few minutes, one of their three kids noticed smoke in the house. He got his brother and sister outside, and told the neighbor, who called the fire department. The house was totally destroyed by fire and water damage, but the entire family got out safely. Last month they moved back into their rebuilt home, and Julie says that they have learned that family and faith are more important than things. She is a baseball fan, so last month I gave her anything I owned that bore the logo of the Kansas City Royals: t-shirts, sweatshirts, a clock, a pillow; a framed poster autographed by Paul Splitorff, Denny Matthews, and Slugerrr; a few baseballs, including one autographed by Clint Hurdle; and one of my prized possessions, a bat autographed by George Brett.

I haven't missed any of it. I know I'd be happier if I gave more things away. Even thinking about possessions requires time that I could use doing other things. My older brother John is very good at throwing things out. One year at Christmas, we were discussing what to give this man who doesn't keep things. Someone suggested we rent a dumpster for a week, so that John could throw even more things away.

The disciples of Jesus lived simple lives. They were fishers and farmers. They didn't carry luggage around when they traveled with him. They probably didn't own very much. And yet, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked to them about their obsession with things - what to eat, what to drink, and what to wear. Even people who don't own very much can be distracted by envy. They yearn to have more things.

Everyone has desires, but we do not always identify them properly. Ultimately our desire is for God, but we sometimes pursue the wrong pleasures. We are like someone who needs to buy groceries but goes instead to the auto parts store. Jesus wants to turn the steering wheel of our lives away from possessions we do not need. It shouldn't take a house fire to make us realize that the one we most need is God.

This Wednesday we begin the season of Lent, a perfect time to reflect on what makes us happy. Many of us desire a greater variety of food, drink, and clothing. But Christ invites us to a greater variety of prayer, fasting and service. There is no end to the variety of clothes you can buy, and they still won't make you happy. But if you pursue a life of prayer and service, they will bring constant contentment. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," Jesus says, "and all these things will be given you besides." He may not increase our possessions, but he will make us content with the possessions we have - with God.