

Kevin Nadolski, OSFS  
June 8, 2008, *Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Our Lady Queen of Peace

Just this week I was on the phone with my longtime friend, Michelle. I consider her one of my perspective teachers. She is always teaching me something. From the days when we went to each other's proms and dances in Philadelphia as high school students to these days of sharing life, she seems just to know just how to frame whatever it is she is living through. I have no idea how we got on the topic, but she was telling me about a troubled time in her marriage when she and her husband went to a marriage counselor. Listening to their woes, the counselor exhaled and said, "You know, sometimes marriages just have a bad year or two." Michelle laughed—out loud, probably wanting to say: "Try three or four." But what she took for the advice was how the commitment required daily renewal. She and Bill have been together for eleven years now, have two children, and she is down to 79 pounds as she is fighting to live with a disease called scleroderma. She is glad that she made the daily commitment.

On Monday night I was at the funeral of my friend Anne's dad, who died after 66 years of marriage. I got to know Mr. and Mrs. Krznicar pretty well in their closing years and was truly edified by their marriage. His patience seemed to have no end, despite her challenging dementia. They cared for each other with a tender devotion that took romance to a sacred sphere. As Anne and I stood by his body at the funeral home, I asked her: "Where your parents always so happily married?" Without thinking, she said: "No way. There were years when my sister and I prayed they would separate. But, then we kids moved out and things got so much better for them. It seems that there were three sets of twenty years of their marriage. Each got better." Maybe that coal miner and his wife went to the same marriage counselor as Michelle and Bill.

I speak to these two relationships not so much as examples of marriage, but as examples of mercy. In today's liturgy of the word, we hear the same line repeated: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." I think we in this Latin-influenced, Western Church connect mercy to forgiveness—certainly not a bad thing. But, forgiveness is a consequence of mercy. The mercy must first be in place. What, then, is mercy?

Mercy comes from the Hebrew word, *hesed*. It means loyalty, fidelity, and joint obligation between relatives and friends. Very simply, mercy means closeness and solidarity in relationships. I am wondering if forgiveness has become so challenging because we have forgotten that closeness, loyalty, and solidarity must precede the forgiveness. It doesn't come out of thin air; it comes from the thick ties that bind people together. Mercy is making the relationship itself the chief priority.

The word mercy seems to have fallen out of our vocabulary. I would like to share—at length—a modern version of mercy, what one writer calls empathy, something I think we are familiar with. Today, I share the pulpit with a woman from Iran, Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I think she makes the point of mercy well.

*I believe in empathy. I believe in the kind of empathy that is created through imagination and through intimate, personal relationships.*

*I am a writer and a teacher so much of my time is spent interpreting stories and connecting to other individuals. It is the urge to know more about ourselves and others that creates empathy. Through imagination and our desire for rapport, we transcend our limitations, freshen our eyes, and are able to look at ourselves and the world through a new and alternative lens.*

*Whenever I think the word “empathy,” I think of a small boy named Huckleberry Finn contemplating his friend and runaway slave, Jim. Huck asks himself whether he should give Jim up or not. Huck was told in Sunday school that people who let slaves go free go to “everlasting fire.” But then, Huck says he imagines he and Jim in “the day and nighttime, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing.” Huck remembers Jim and their friendship and warmth. He imagines Jim not as a slave but as a human being and he decides that, “alright, then, I’ll go to hell.”*

*What Huck rejects is not religion but an attitude of self-righteousness and inflexibility. I remember this particular scene out of Huck Finn so vividly today because I associate it with a difficult time in my own life. In the early 1980s, when I taught at the University of Tehran, I, like many others, was expelled (for not wearing a veil). I was very surprised to discover that my staunchest allies were two students who were very active at the university’s powerful Muslim Students’ Association. These young men and I had engaged in very passionate and heated arguments. I had fiercely opposed their ideological stances. But that didn’t stop them from defending me. When I ran into one of them after my expulsion, I thanked him for his support. “We are not as rigid as you imagine us to be, Professor Nafisi,” he responded. “Remember you own lectures on Huck? Let’s just say, he is not only one who can risk going to hell!”*

*This experience in my life reinforces my belief in the mysterious connections that link individuals to each other despite their vast differences. No amount of political correctness can make us empathize with a child left orphaned in Darfur or a woman taken to a football stadium in Kabul because she is improperly dressed. Only curiosity about the fate of others, the ability to put ourselves in their shoes, and the will to enter their world through the magic of imagination creates the shock of recognition. Without this empathy there can be no genuine dialogue, and we as individuals and nations will remain isolated and alien, segregated and fragmented.*

*I believe that it is only through empathy that the pain experienced by an Algerian woman, a North Korean dissident, a Rwandan child, or an Iraqi prisoner becomes real to me and not just passing news. And it is at times like this when I ask myself, am I prepared—like Huck Finn—to give up Sunday school heaven for the kind of hell that Huck chose? (Azar Nafisi, “Mysterious Connections That Link Us Together,” in This I Believe, pp. 171-173, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2007)*

Like Huck, Jesus was a person of tremendous empathy. God becoming human, he was able to feel our joys and pains because he took them on—all of them, from dancing at a wedding to suffering betrayal, loss, and death. Our God didn't just walk in our shoes, he took on our flesh. No wonder the Lord has mercy on us.

As Christians, we are blessed by God's mercy, day in and day out. Church, is today, the day when we will give that mercy away? I think God is hoping that it is. Maybe that's why he gave it to us in the first place!