

Kevin Nadolski, OSFS

October 14, 2007: Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

For today's homily, I would like to seek the help of three people: a leper, a loner, and a loser, for what we see in today's liturgy of the word is that Jesus picks the least likely person to preach us one of his most important messages.

First, the leper: I am sure that we are all pretty well aware of how ostracized lepers were—and still are. No one ever wants to be near them. In Jesus' day, for the Jews, the only thing that was lower in status than a leper was a leper who was a Samaritan. He just would not have counted or mattered or even been worthy of our time, no less attention. Yet, Jesus in his untiring efforts to shatter the artificial and immoral nature of things like status, social class, and hierarchy lets someone from the lowest wrung ring out a gospel message of gratitude that is so necessary to be heard in our American culture, where meritocracy seems to trump grace.

In *Radical Gratitude*, Mary Jo Leddy writes: "In the culture of money, we tend to have a ledger view of life. We add up the pluses and minuses and try to account for our lives. In the process, we miss the amazing fact that we have a life to add up. We take being alive for granted and move on to a cost-benefit analysis. Lost in the process is the incalculable mystery of simply being alive. The liberation of gratitude begins when we stop taking life for granted."

While all of the lepers in the gospel today were liberated, it seems that only the Samaritan was liberated by gratitude. He goes forth not just cured of leprosy, but healed from its alienation. He not only has a new lease on life; he has life to the full, and it appears that his gratitude will let him live always as a person fully alive. For him, it was being possessed by gratitude, not cured of leprosy, that makes him leap into his future, no matter what befalls him. Are we able to be possessed by a similar gratitude for the lives we have been given?

Second, the loner. In a new movie, we see both the beautiful American landscape of the great Northwest and the complex spiritual landscape of a young man blessed with bounty beyond measure. Sean Penn's film, *Into the Wild*, based on Jack Krakauer's book by the same title, tells the story of a Christopher McCandless, whose education, family's love, and inherited opportunity are rather steep. With his freshly minted college diploma from one of our nation's finest schools, young Christopher gives him money to Oxfam and goes west in search of spiritual heights and personal authenticity. Sadly, he dies of hunger in Alaska. Yet, before his death, he writes a simple message: "Happiness, only real when shared."

This loner is onto something. The richest moments are shared with another. In light of today's gospel, I wonder if gratitude is the chief way to share such joy. To give thanks to the person who has made the happiness possible deepens the joy and makes it real. I was recently in a conversation with a Mother who was telling me all about her daughter's wedding. She was proud that the celebration was so much fun, that all had a good time,

and her planning details were on target. She went on to tell me that her favorite moment wasn't seeing her daughter dressed so beautifully or the loveliness of the flowers or even the God-given perfect day of Washington weather. She said that she will never forget that amid all of the busyness and excitement of the day, her daughter and son-in-law asked to see her at the wedding reception. In a few minutes of simple conversation amid all of the music and dancing and partying, the bride and groom said thank you and expressed their gratitude for making such joy come to life. This Mom said she was never so happy. Do we share our happiness through gratitude, whether in conversations with loved one or in prayer with our God?

Finally, the loser. I suppose I use this term liberally, for the loser I refer to is the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Al Gore. I wonder if before Friday's announcement, Al Gore would have been known more for his audible sighs and his painful, brooding defeat in the election of 2000. Yet, his efforts to pick himself up, reinvent his life, and recommit to his chief passions has helped him help us grow more aware of our great gift of creation.

I have often wondered that in the story of Adam and Eve the great sin, the original sin, is not disobedience, but lack of gratitude for all that they were given. The garden had to be beautiful, they were in love, and they had no worries. Why didn't they say, "Thank you, God!" I think it is too easy to say that they were taking all of these gifts for granted. I wonder, as the story goes, were Adam and Eve just lazy in the care of their environment? When we are grateful for things and people and relationships, we care more for them. We cherish, protect, and value whatever and whoever it is that we are thankful for.

I am thinking that the grateful Samaritan went off into his new life caring more fully for his health and being more careful in the choices he was making with it. Pope Benedict XVI recently exhorted us to care more deliberately for our environment: "Global warming and care for water resources are matters of critical importance that requires the attention of the entire human family," he said. "Care of water resources and attention to climate change are matters of grave importance for the entire human family. Encouraged by the growing recognition of the need to preserve the environment, I invite all of you to join me in praying and working for greater respect for the wonders of God's creation."

Whether we are reminded of our commitment to care for the earth by a losing politician or a sitting pope, our gratitude for the planet we have been given could well be the motivator to change our behavior and our values on this all-important matter.

In a few moments, we shall pray the words of a man who befriended lepers, spent time as a loner, and was considered a loser. When we celebrate this meal of gratitude that we call the Eucharist, let us recommit to his life and all that it promises. A life that calls forth the simple and profound response that ends every Eucharist: Thanks be to God!