

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Reflection

Well, that's Good News. No matter what label anyone puts on you, Jesus calls you blessed.

This Gospel passage always reminds me of something the late Fr. Herb Grattan said in a homily he delivered in the late 1970's at Immaculate Heart of Mary church. He said that when you are 20 years old you are worried about what everyone thinks about you. When you are 40 years old, you don't care what anyone thinks about you. And when you are 60 years old, you realize that no one thought about you at all. I was 17 years old when I first heard this and am now 63. I think he was right about the 20 and 40 part, but not about the 60 part. When I was 20, I was consumed with being a people pleaser and wanted to be liked by everyone. So much so, that I wasn't genuine. When you are trying to please everyone, you please no one, least of all yourself. Then, by 40, I really tried to make myself believe that I didn't care what anyone thought about me. But that wasn't true. I did care, I just didn't let it govern who I was. I got to a place where I was more comfortable with who I was and while I hoped you and I could build a relationship, if it wasn't in the cards, that was OK too. When you begin to live your life worrying about what other people think of you, they have become your God. Now that I am into my 60's, I realize that many people have thought about me, were concerned for my well-being, and some, even took the time to pray for me, as I have for them.

Being in this job for the last 9 years, I have been blessed to meet and journey with many folks who were at different places in their life. Some on the verge of new beginnings, either beginning a new chapter in their education, or making a difficult career decision or even entering into marriage, or the birth of a new baby, and the excitement that goes with that. I have also journeyed with people who are experiencing very serious health challenges and for the first time, thoughts of their own mortality and dealing with the anxiety of the unknown. And, I have also walked with people who have just lost a spouse and are now trying to figure out what's next and how they are going to manage life without the one who has made them feel confident, secure and most of all, loved, through all the challenges that have come their way. The one common thread among all these people is a realization that they cannot do any of these things alone. We need people and, more importantly, we need God.

We live in a world where we are being encouraged, if not pushed, into believing that we can function totally autonomously. Just doing our own thing day in and day out. "I won't bother you, and you don't bother me" seems to be our new motto. I recently had a conversation with my son, and we said, "you know, you could probably go through a whole day and not interact with another human being." He works from home and is in front of a computer screen all day. Any personal banking can be done online or from an ATM. He can order groceries through an app and have them dropped at his door with just a ring of the doorbell letting him know they are there. And texting or social media has replaced the phone call. Young people seem to prefer this way of living. And maybe it can work for awhile, until it doesn't. You know, in life, today probably won't look a

whole lot different than yesterday, and tomorrow probably won't look a whole lot different than today. Until it doesn't. Until something major changes in our world and life as we knew it ceases to exist, and trying to fix it ourselves isn't going to work.

I think that is what Jesus is trying to communicate to us in today's Gospel, which is his first public address. There is going to come a time in all of our lives when we will be poor in spirit, when we will be mourning the loss of something or someone and we will need the support of others. Equally, there will also be times when we are called on to be that support for others. To comfort others, to bring mercy to others, to be the presence of God for others.

So, what is fueling this movement toward isolating ourselves from others? I think it's fear. Not a fear of others, but a fear of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. Because being vulnerable means risking that someone will see the not so wonderful parts of us and decide to walk away. And we are keenly aware of the "not so wonderful" parts of us, because, who is harder on you than you? And, if there are parts of me that I don't love, or even like, then how can I expect someone else to?

Just a couple of weeks ago we celebrated the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. If you remember, as Jesus came up from the water, there was a voice from heaven saying, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I would read this story years ago to parents in baptism preparation sessions and tell them that God is not only well pleased with Jesus, but also with your baby and with you.

Then I would ask them the question, “Do you think of yourself as being well-pleasing to God?” The answer, almost 100% of the time was, “no!” I think that was not only true for those parents gathered at those sessions, I think it would be the answer given by most gathered here if I asked you the same question. We have been so conditioned to focus on what’s wrong with us way more than focusing on what’s is good about us. I guess that keeps us from getting “too big for our britches” as my mother used to say.

But just for moment, right now, let’s give ourselves permission to think of ourself as sacred, well-pleasing to God, holy and as Jesus tells us today, blessed. You. Me. The person sitting next to you. The person you love the most. The person you don’t like that much. All united by the fact that you are a child of God. And as such, no matter your social status, economic situation, living situation, living in a mansion or homeless, your health status, married, divorced, searching, lonely, etc. You have a dignity that can never be taken away by anything or anyone. You are not only enough, you are one of the most incredible things God has ever created. Why would you want to hide that away, going through life on your own.

If I may I would like to share this blessing with you written by Jan Richardson, a minister in the United Methodist Church. I especially invite the young folks with us to hear this. Close your eyes if you wish:

This blessing takes
one look at you

and all it can say is

holy.

Holy hands.

Holy face.

Holy feet.

Holy everything

in between.

Holy even in pain.

Holy even when weary.

In brokenness, holy.

In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight.

Holy in distress.

Holy when being born.

Holy when we lay it down

at the hour of our death.

So, friend,

open your eyes

(holy eyes).

For one moment

see what this blessing sees,

this blessing that knows

how you have been formed

and knit together
in wonder and
in love.
Welcome this blessing
that folds its hands
in prayer
when it meets you;
receive this blessing
that wants to kneel
in reverence
before you—
you who are
temple,
sanctuary,
home for God
in this world.

Mark Mahoney