

A man was sitting reading the newspaper when his wife hit him round the head with a frying pan. "What was that for?" the man asked. The wife replied, "That was for the piece of paper with the name Betty on it that I found in your pants pocket." The man explained, "When I was at the races last week, BETTY was the name of the horse I bet on!" The wife apologized and went on with the housework. Three days later the man is watching TV when his wife bashes him on the head with an even bigger frying pan, knocking him out cold. Upon regaining consciousness, the man asked why she had hit him again. She replied, "Your HORSE just phoned!"

OK, first, some background on this gospel text. Today's snippet actually closes a section which began in the third chapter (3:7-6:6). It recounts Jesus' rejection by His own people. It ends with a failure more dramatic than the plots the Pharisees and Herodians began to weave against Him. So we find Jesus in His hometown. The synagogue in Nazareth is the 2nd synagogue in which Mark tells us that Jesus preached. His first synagogue appearances were in Capernaum, mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3. Mark tells us that Jesus 'astonished' the people of Nazareth. The word 'astonish' implies that He aroused intense interest but not necessarily any fidelity or even real respect. Rather than provoking hope, Jesus' familiar but challenging presence sparked a series of reservations and questions about Him and what made Him capable of saying and doing what He did.

It's notable that His neighbors did not ask about the truth or goodness of what He did, but rather about where He got the knowledge, wisdom and power to do it all. The people of Nazareth thought they knew His background and therefore they thought they knew His limits as well as they knew their own. Their problem is an age-old one, called the Scandal of the Incarnation. This is the shocking reality that God could reveal Himself through ordinary people and events, through what the First Epistle of John speaks of as 'what we have seen with our eyes....and touched with our hands.' The scandal of the Incarnation threatens us because God comes so close that we must respond directly and personally, without the protection of rituals and dogmas. The people in the synagogue at Nazareth heard Jesus' message, but they chose familiar limitations over divine possibilities. It's easy to have faith in a God who spoke long ago to Abraham and Moses, and remains somewhere 'out there.' These happenings are outside of our own time and place and go beyond our limits. And if something doesn't fit into our own little religious imagination, we tend to dismiss it.

When God appears in the poor, the immigrant, someone we disagree with or dislike, we tend to dismiss Him. Our faith is often crippled by our limited expectations, and our lack of imagination. And because of the lack of faith of the people of Nazareth, we are told Jesus could work no mighty deeds among them. The scandal of the Incarnation is that God still is entering our history, speaking our language and – even more remarkably – allows Himself to be constrained by our lack of faith. The most frightening and exciting truth about it is that God wants to work miracles in and through us – and our weakness. But we have to be open to let Him do it. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 8 July 2018, p. 1-2, 3)

Second, part of the problem as it applies to us. Despite Jesus' wisdom and miracles, His own people reject Him because, as they say, "Is He not the carpenter, the son of Mary?" Jesus quotes a proverb that says, in essence: "A prophet is only despised in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house." He is only one of them – from a one-camel town -- so how could He attain such wisdom? We can hear them thinking "Just who does He think He is? We knew Him when He was in diapers! He's just another kid from Nazareth." St. Augustine named the problem – jealousy and envy. And Augustine saw jealousy and envy as 'the diabolical sin.' Envy keeps us from seeing God working in our world and hinders us from responding to God's vision for our world. Indeed, Jesus 'was not able to perform any mighty deed there.'

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Anne Lamott wrote: “Some wonderful, dazzling successes are going to happen for some of the most awful, angry, undeserving people you know – people who are, in other words, not you.” I would guess that at least 80 percent of our criticisms of others have their roots in Envy. The fox in Aesop’s fable devalues the grapes in order to console himself for not being able to reach them. A priest friend of mine and I, when we were both newly ordained, drove old clinkers. Any time we were out together and a beautiful, shiny new car pulled up next to us, we would turn to one another and say, “But they’re not happy!” Those of us who are not particularly wealthy really need to believe that rich people are miserable. Sour grapes. The kid who does not do particularly well in school condemns those ‘nerds’ who do. The kid who is not athletic says that the athletes are just dumb muscle-heads. The one who fails morally needs to believe that the good person is a self-righteous, Bible-quoting fake.

Adam Smith says “Envy is that passion which views with malignant dislike the superiority of those who are really entitled to all the superiority they possess.” Envy goes beyond the passivity of mere resentment at the achievements of others, or joy at their failures. Envy can also be an active conspirator in the downfall of others. We see envy in the glee with which some people condemn the errors of others, a glee that is often far out of proportion to the magnitude of their own errors, as well as their subtle attempts to derail the good that others would do. Dr. Samuel Johnson says this envy stems from “The satisfaction of poisoning the banquet which they cannot taste, and blasting the harvest which they have no right to reap.”

We can tell if we suffer from envy by asking ourselves a few questions: How often in a given day do I praise another, as opposed to criticize another? How often do I nitpick, and why do I nitpick? Why do I find it much easier to be empathetic with someone who is hurting as opposed to sharing truly in someone’s good fortune? Why do I experience a secret glee upon hearing about the fall from grace of a celebrity? Why do I struggle to bless younger people? When did I last truly praise a younger person of the same sex?

And as I was writing this homily this past week, I felt pretty smug – envy is not really my sin. I’m better than that. And then I got a phone call from a priest friend of mine, telling me that one of our classmates was just named a monsignor. Not that I have sought this honor for myself, but still, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that I might have been made a monsignor. Although I certainly, through my untiring and unselfish efforts, deserve the honor far more than he, I could never have lowered myself to his sycophantic, groveling, unctuous efforts whereby the monsignorate came to him. I always knew he was just a little brownnoser!

So feel free to ignore everything I just said about my envy immunity. The green-eyed monster gets me too! (help from Willimon, *SINNING LIKE A CHRISTIAN*, p. 58)

Third, what’s the remedy? For the people of Nazareth – and us? A number of years ago, in an essay in *TIME* magazine, Roger Rosenblatt offered this advice to his son who was graduating from high school and heading off to college: “Whatever you do in life, be sure to admire others who do it as well or better than you. My trade of journalism is sodden with practitioners who seem incapable of admiring others or anything.”

The incapacity to admire seems to be a universal disease today. We see it everywhere – in the academic world, in professional circles of all kinds, even in clergy and church life, and in families. It seems none of us are very good at affording anyone (outside of a very select circle of ‘our own’) the gaze of admiration. Children are still good at admiring but, among us adults, there’s little in the way of simple appreciative consciousness. We know how to criticize, but not how to admire.

Why? What’s causing this? Why do others and the things around us never seem good enough, never seem worthy of admiration? Why do we always find fault in everyone and everything? We’d like to think it’s

sophistication, a refined sense of truth, aesthetics, and history that makes us so critical of others and things. Indeed, there is a flaw in everything. Only God is perfect. Everything and everybody else have faults that can be criticized.

But our sophistication and seemingly refined sense of aesthetics is ultimately not the reason why we find ourselves so easily offended, hypercritical, and so stingy in our admiration and praise. Something more base lurks underneath: immaturity. In the end, our itch to criticize rather than admire is, more often than not, nothing more than a projection of our own unhappiness and a not-so-subtle plea that's saying: "Admire me!" "Notice me!" "Why am I not being noticed and admired?" WHY AM I NOT A MONSIGNOR?

Anthropology tells us that adulthood can be defined this way: A mature man or woman is a principle of order rather than disorder; is someone who helps carry the burdens and tensions of others rather than dumps his or her own tensions on them; is someone who helps feed others rather than feeds off of them; and is someone who admires others as opposed to demanding that others admire him or her. One of the defining traits of human maturity is the capacity to admire. If that is true, and I believe that it is, then our proclivity for criticism speaks more about our immaturity than our supposed enlightenment.

Thomas Aquinas once stated that to withhold a compliment from someone is a sin because we are withholding food that this person needs to live. That's a challenging statement, but the challenge is more than that of providing food for the other to live on. Admiring others also provides us with the food we ourselves need.

One of the reasons why we live with so much dissatisfaction, anger, bitterness and depression is precisely because we no longer know how to admire. It's hard to be happy and to feel good about ourselves when we don't feel very good about anything or anyone around us. Without admiration we can never be happy – nor can we see straight, irrespective of how sophisticated, educated, scientifically trained, aesthetically fine-tuned, or hermeneutically enlightened we are.

Hugo of St. Victor had an axiom which said: "Love is the eye!" Only when we see through the prism of love do we see correctly. Admiration is part of that. When we don't admire, we aren't seeing straight, pure and simple. When we are forever seeing what's wrong in others, that speaks volumes about our own interior state. Partly we see what's out there, partly though what we think we see is largely colored by our own interior disposition. Thus a habitually negative eye says more about the beholder than it does about the beheld.

Whenever our world feels gray, whenever we feel bitter and short-changed, and whenever we feel frustrated with everything and everyone, we need to ask ourselves: "When was the last time I really admired someone?" "When was the last time I told someone that he or she had done something really well?" "When is the last time I looked at anything or anyone with the gaze of admiration?"

Fr. Ronald Rolheiser says that "When we admire we get to feel good, because, when we act like God, we get to feel like God." Isn't that a great line? When we ACT like God, we get to FEEL like God! God is never gray, depressed, or cynical, and God's first gaze at us, as both Scripture and the mystics assure us, is not one of critical disapproval, but one of admiration. "And God saw that it was VERY good," Genesis tells us after He had created us. As Julian of Norwich put it, God sits in heaven, completely relaxed, smiling, His face looking like a marvelous symphony. Isn't that beautiful? God is relaxed, smiling, and looking at us with admiration – His face looking like a marvelous symphony. How blessed we are my friends! And what a blessing we can be

to others – if we but learn to admire, to see with the eyes of God. Amen. (last section adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, SPIRITUALITY: THE NEED TO ADMIRE, *TOWER TOPICS*, SPRING 2003)

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