

Perhaps you've heard of Rodney Dangerfield. He was a comedian who was famous for his line, "I get no respect." One of the funniest self-effacing stories he told is how as a child he got lost at the state fair. Obviously desperate, he found a policeman and asked for help with finding his parents. After searching for a while, Rodney asks the policeman, "Do you think we'll find my parents?"

"I don't know, kid," the officer replies. "There's so many places where they could hide." No respect.

Today's readings teach us about respect. Not respect in the way we usually think of the word, not in the sense of the respect we give to someone in a position of authority. I am using the word **respect** in an alternative, more basic way. *Respect* comes from the Latin word, *respicere* – which means to look back at, to look at a second time. In other words, to look more **closely**, more **deeply**. **That** is the kind of respect God reveals in the readings. It is the kind of respect we secretly long for as a holy people of God.

The book of Samuel gives us a wonderful example of God's respect. In this story, Jesse presents to Samuel each of his seven older sons only to discover that it was his youngest son, David, who's to be the anointed king of Israel. Samuel puts it rather bluntly:

"Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart."

You know, Bible stories do not always grab our attention – they may seem distant and irrelevant to our lives. Sometimes they're downright hard to understand. So I would like to retell this passage from Samuel in a modern context.

Imagine that the United States is a theocracy – a country ruled by God. Now imagine that the chief justice of the Supreme Court is also a prophet/priest – just like Samuel. Under this theocracy, the chief justice is required to go out and search for the future president of the country. Next, imagine that you are a father or mother of a large family and one day the chief justice appears at your door. He announces who he is and that his mission is to locate the next president. You are overwhelmed by the thought that one of your sons might be president. So you proudly present them, one by one.

The first is an excellent student – straight A's and a scholarship to Notre Dame. The second is not only a scholar but also a fine athlete. And so on down the line. But none of the seven sons satisfies the chief justice. Finally, he asks you, "Are these **all** your children?" You hesitate and then admit, "Well, there's my youngest child – equally bright and capable – but...well, you see, my youngest is a girl. I have a daughter." And, of course, you know how the story ends. The chief justice declares that this girl is to be a future president of the country.

Now – you look on your daughter in a different way. You begin to have real respect for her. You look **again**. You look more **deeply**. You look more closely than **ever** before. Now you begin to see as God sees – not just outward appearances; you look past outer appearances and focus on the heart. You have real **respect**.

What a freeing moment it is when we realize that God looks at the heart. When we come to this realization, we can look at our children in a new way. We can stop judging them by what they have done or have not done. We can relax in the knowledge that this son or daughter,

who might be unaccomplished by the standards of the world, is seen by God in an entirely different way. Because you see, God does not glance at his children's outer appearance – as we often do. No, God gives a long, loving gaze into the hearts of his children...and God sees there the image of himself. God does this with each and every one of us. God has true **respect** for us. God **cannot** stop gazing lovingly upon all of his creation.

I believe that sometimes God uses comic strips to teach us how to see. I have always felt that the "Family Circle" comic strip often has some good theology in it. Once it showed the little boy, Jeff, looking out a window and exclaiming excitedly, "Look at all the birds, all the flowers and things out there." Then his sister comes to the window and says, "Look at all the dust, the smudges, and the fingerprints on this window." As Jeff walks away, he says, "Don't you know that windows are for looking **through, not at?**" We should all want to have this kind of vision.

Lent reminds us that we should **want** to get beyond our prejudices, our biases, our fears, and see all people – all of creation – as God does. This should be a part of our **constant** longing to be a holy people. But how do we do it?

Well, Jesus gives us the answer today in the Gospel.

The long story of the man healed of his blindness teaches us that it's only by coming to faith in Jesus Christ that our vision can be fully restored. This story is intended specifically for the members of our community who will be entering the Church at Easter – our elect and candidates. Depictions of this story appear seven times in the catacombs at Rome. And the depictions are always associated with baptism. And recall – the man newly healed from his blindness is told by Jesus to wash in the waters of Siloam – reminding us of our own baptism.

And the story is about enlightenment. It's about seeing more clearly. It's about **respect**. To the Pharisees, the man in today's Gospel was a true Rodney Dangerfield. He gets no respect. To most Pharisees, he's seen as a sinner, as an impostor, a fool. Who **respects this** man?

Well, **Jesus** does.

Jesus looks on him with the loving gaze of God and not only heals him of his physical blindness, but brings him to faith in Christ. Notice that when first asked who healed him, the man replies: "The man called Jesus" did it. Later, he says of Jesus, "He is a prophet." Still later, he acknowledges Jesus as the Son of Man. And finally, and most importantly, he simply says, "I do believe, Lord." The text continues, "And he **worshipped** him." This is actually a synopsis of our growth in faith – growth that takes a lifetime.

So how do we come to see as God sees? By drawing closer to Christ in faith. It starts with our baptism but, and this is important, it is a lifelong process of giving our hearts to Christ.

An intellectual knowledge of the historical Jesus isn't enough. An intellectual knowledge of Jesus as a prophet – as the greatest man who ever lived – isn't enough.

It is only when we're able to say, "Jesus is Lord," – and mean it, that we make the breakthrough into seeing as God sees. It is then that we experience **true respect**.

In my speaking of respect, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that this year, the Church celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Pope John Paul II's *Evangelium vitae* – The Gospel of Life. This document reaffirmed the value and un-breakability of every human life...and to appeal to all people to respect, protect, love, and serve every human life.

Evangelium vitae can be distilled into two main points. **First**, the Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' saving message to the world. Through the incarnation and birth of Christ, God reveals to us the dignity of all human life. God teaches us that life, being a gift from Himself, is **sacred**.

Life is **holy**. The Son of God has united himself with every human being and desires for us to share eternal life with him. For this reason, direct attacks on human life, such as abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment, **are always unacceptable**.

Second, in sharing in the lowliest and most vulnerable conditions of human life – **even death on a cross** – Jesus shows us that life **is always good**. God holds the lives of all people in his gentle and loving care. This action on God's part gives meaning and value to any sufferings we bear. Even within the mystery which surrounds suffering and death, these experiences can become saving events. This is so because we unite them to Christ's own suffering and death.

By making human life the instrument of our salvation, Jesus shows us the **priceless value** of human life. Governments and international institutions promote abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment as marks of freedom, progress, and justice. But this is a false understanding of what God's gift of freedom really means. This false understanding equates God's freedom with absolute individualism **and** human sensibilities about what justice is.

John Paul II was trying to tell us that a moral society is one that rejects a culture of death and commits itself to building a culture of life. Society, as a whole, must respect, must defend, and must promote the dignity of every human person – at every moment and in every condition of that person's life. No exceptions.

Each life is a gift from God and ultimately belongs to him. God has sole authority over life and death. Not the individual **and** not the government. The Church, therefore, calls us to reverence and love every human person. It is our duty to proclaim this Gospel of Life to the world.

To proclaim Jesus is to proclaim life itself. This is hard for some to accept, but...in every child which is born, in every person who is suffering, in every person who is on death row, we are to see the image of God's glory.

As Christians, and especially as Catholic Christians, we are called to celebrate this glory in every human being – a sign of the living God – an icon of Jesus Christ.