

## BEYOND NICE

*Sermon for St. Laurence Day – 2Cor9:6-10, Jn 12:24-26*

LPC, 8/9/09

In this day and age, it can be challenging to find a social value that everyone can espouse. In many ways I think our society has settled the issue by elevating *niceness* to the highest social value to which a person can aspire.

Niceness as a defining social value has many advantages. Niceness preserves harmony between persons, even when they experience disagreements and differences. Niceness reinforces casual relationships, and enhances commerce and cooperative work environments. Where would we be without niceness? As people say, “A little niceness goes a long way.” And, “It costs you nothing to be nice.” This is all true.

But is being nice enough? There is nothing like the story of a martyr to challenge our notions of conventional morality. Martyrs, people who die for their faith, go far beyond nice. People do not become martyrs to be nice. People do not give their lives for the sake of *niceness*.

Today we celebrate the martyr whom we have decided to claim as patron of our parish: St. Laurence. His story is told in your leaflet. He was arrested during one of the Roman Empire’s worst persecutions of Christians. His companions, including the Pope, were executed, while he was spared only because he was sent to collect the church’s treasury, which was to be turned over to the Roman prefect. According to his legend, St. Laurence instead collected the poor and sick to whom he had ministered as a deacon of the church and declared, “Here are the treasures of the church.”

The prefect was so enraged he decreed a particularly awful death for Laurence: to be roasted alive over a fire. Supposedly Laurence retained his sense of humor to the last. His last words were to tell his executioner, “Turn me over. I think I’m done on this side.” This may be the origin of his being named patron saint of comedians. He is also the patron of librarians and students (probably owing to his profession during life) as well as cooks and tanners (likely references to his mode of death.)

Nowadays Christians almost never die for the faith, unless they run afoul of the Taliban, which for most of us is easy enough to avoid. While we are grateful to practice our faith in peace, we run the risk of taking our faith for granted. We need to hear stories like that of St. Laurence, so that his ardor, and the ardor of all the saints and martyrs, may inform and inspire our own.

Our society is “nice.” It permits us to practice our religion. Paradoxically, too often this much freedom of religion results in the non-practice of religion. In other words, without something to fight against, we cease to fight. St. Laurence reminds us that following Christ is something worth fighting for.

Our society does not oppose us modern-day Christians with persecution, but it does oppose us with certain prevailing attitudes and values. St. Laurence's story throws those oppositions into high relief.

For example, our society does not value the poor and sick. At best, in our society, the poor and sick are regarded as a problem to deal with. At our best, we set up programs for the poor and sick. Think of how St. Laurence's attitude differs from this. St. Laurence did not just minister to the poor and sick. St. Laurence presented the poor and sick as the treasures of the church.

That is a huge difference in orientation and attitude. Think of how the present-day church's ministry would change if the poor were regarded as treasure. Not, "them" or, "those poor unfortunates," not even as "just folks like us," but *treasured* members of the body of Christ. This is beyond "nice."

Today's readings from 2 Corinthians and the gospel of John well express other aspects of St. Laurence's story that suggest deep contrasts with our prevailing culture. 2 Corinthians talks about how true wealth lies in generosity. God provides, therefore share. St. Laurence lived his life this way. But how different his life is from our culture, which prizes acquisition, and encourages the notion, "I earned it – it's mine!" 2 Corinthians, by contrast, teaches that those who share their wealth with others will always have enough. This too goes beyond "nice."

Finally, the reading from John teaches that "those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This is typical biblical hyperbole, or overstatement, but what it really means is this: Being concerned primarily with protecting your own life, your own goods, your own way of doing things, is no way to live. You may think you are preserving your life, but you're not living. That way is death. Being generous, unselfish and oriented toward God and the world, that's really living, even if you should die doing it.

St. Laurence died doing it, but as the last line of his story in your bulletin leaflet implies, his living for Christ was more important than dying for Christ.

You and I, thank God, will not in all likelihood be asked to die for Christ, but we can live for Christ.

How? By being more than "nice."