

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When a reporter asked America's first billionaire, "How much money is enough?" John D. Rockefeller famously replied, "Just a little bit more." Everyone has a hunger, no matter how much we own. To his credit, Rockefeller became a philanthropist, but many of us do not want to share until we acquire what we think is sufficient. Our director of Morning Glory Ministries, John Kraus, recently told stories of guests, who eat here because they can't afford to buy food for themselves, yet still share what little they have with those who have even less. Whether we consider ourselves poor in finances, health, free time, friends or faith, we all make a choice between self-pity and generosity. Will we make others tend our needs, or will we be generous with what we have?

Saint Blase died about the year 320. The facts about his life are impossible to establish, but these stories that sound somewhat fanciful survive: Blase had wealthy parents and became bishop in Armenia while he was young. The government was persecuting Christians, so Blase fled in poverty to a cave. Wild animals discovered he could cure their sicknesses. Pagan hunters found him and dragged him off to be interrogated by the anti-Christian governor. On the way, they met a poor woman, saddened because a wolf had carried off her pig. Blase talked to the wolf, and the wolf returned the pig, alive and unharmed. Blase was found guilty of being a Christian and put into a dark prison cell. This woman brought him food and candles. While he was there, Blase dislodged a fish bone from a young boy's throat. Eventually, Blase the bishop was martyred. Using symbols from these stories, the Catholic Church blesses throats with candles on this day. Most Catholics think of Blase for his ability to heal, but he also sets an example of how good people look after the poor and the disadvantaged, even when they are poor, they are disadvantaged, and their own lives are at risk.

Jesus' life was at risk many times. The infant Jesus escaped the murderous aims of Herod, and in today's passage from Luke, at the start of his preaching career, Jesus faces family and friends in his own home town threatening to hurl him off a cliff. "No prophet is accepted in his own native place," he laments. He recalls two stories of prophets, miracles worked for non-Jews who trusted him in Zarephath and Syria. The people of Nazareth rightly interpreted this sermon as claiming that they were no better than the Gentiles they despised. Right there in the synagogue, in a place that should have filled them with inspiration, they instead were filled with fury. Their attempt to kill Jesus did not stop him. He continued to preach and heal even amid a poverty of support.

To receive the blessing of throats on February 3 is to believe in the healing powers of God and the intercession of the saints. You don't have to be Catholic to receive it. Some people are unfamiliar with this tradition; others look forward to it as a kind of Catholic equivalent to the annual flu shot. We enjoy receiving it because typically when we ask ourselves how much health we'd like to have, the answer is a little bit more. But whether or not we receive it, we are still called to philanthropy. Even when we have only a little, we are still expected to share.

If from your poverty, your ill health, your loneliness, you could ask Jesus, how much patience is enough? How much charity is enough? How much time for my family is enough? He would probably answer, "Just a little bit more."

Sunday, February 3, 2019