

Homily for
Thanksgiving Day
Preached by Fr. Brendan Freeman
(November 24, 2011)

[Scripture Readings: Sir 50:22-24; Col 3:12-17; Lk 17:11-19]

A few weeks ago I was reading an article in a diocesan newspaper about a soccer game between Kenrick Catholic seminary in St. Louis and Concordia Lutheran seminary. I skimmed the article looking for the score sort of half heartedly interested to see if the Catholics won—soccer after all is a Catholic sport, isn't it? I skimmed it a few times but could not find the score so I read it more carefully but no score was reported. I then realized how narrow my view was. A lot of good things happened on the field besides winning and losing. There are a whole host of values besides winners and losers but every story we hear has winners and losers.

Take that idealized painting of the Pilgrims sitting down with the Indians for a turkey dinner. Everything is bliss, a wonderful meeting of two cultures until you think about what happened to the American Indians. They were soon forced not only to leave the table but to leave their land and move west.

If you add a few verses to our first reading today you come up with a similar picture. The verses we heard are a beautiful blessing prayer, but it applies only to Israel. Israel is the chosen race, if not the dominant culture at least the privileged one. How Sirach feels about other cultures is revealed in the next sentence following what we heard: "My whole being loathes two nations, the third is not even a people. Those who dwell in Edom and Philistia and the degenerate folk who dwell in Shechem" (Sir 50:25-26). The Samaritans lived in Shechem. There always seems to be a dark side to life—winners and losers. We can be very kind and generous to our own and downright cruel and mean to strangers and foreigners.

One of ideals of the American experiment was to do away with a privileged class. Benjamin Franklin explains this in an amusing letter to his daughter written in 1784. He begins by lamenting the choice of the Eagle as the national bird. A regal looking bird but a bird with a bad moral character—it steals food from other birds. He tells his daughter the turkey would be a much better choice. Turkeys are sort of folksy and they share their food with other birds in the yard. He then goes on to explain that in the New World there should be no hereditary degrees, no royalty where wealth and title are handed down from above to below for generations. Ours was to be a movement from below upwards where ordinary folk climb the social ladder by the dint of hard work and thrift. No privileged class. Once again this sounds good but the reality proved false. There was a privileged class, there were winners and losers. The white male voted, women and slaves did not.

In so many of his stories Jesus shows that it is the loser, the outcast the degenerate Samaritans of the world that do the right thing while the privileged ones look on clueless. Today's Gospel is a good example. No one at that time was lower than a leper except a Samaritan leper, yet he did the right thing. Even though his situation was miserable his heart was in the right place. He did not lose his true identity because of external circumstances.

It is easy to see why this Gospel was chosen for Thanksgiving Day—one returned to thank Jesus for his cure. But, this parable is not just about a physical healing it is about something much deeper, it is about our need for a spiritual healing. Sin is a type of blindness that leads us to believe we are something we really are not. It is a loss of identity. We may believe we are not a privileged class when we really are or that we treat everyone equally when we really don't or that we do not categorize into winners or losers when we do. Grace leads us to embrace our whole selves, our good side and bad side our light side and our dark side our woundedness. We can hide from ourselves, but not from God. When we stand before the Lord on that last day and he shows us his wounds he may ask us, "where are your wounds"?