

Homily for February 14, 2010 (6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)  
Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26  
St. Philomena Parish, Detroit

I recently came across an article in the Chicago Tribune that asked a question that might seem especially apt for us on this Valentine's Day. The title of the article was, "Are You Dating a Narcissist?" It had the wry subtitle, "When they only have eyes for themselves, consider that a clue." It featured an interview with the author of a book on the dangers that narcissism poses in relationships, a problem that she said was epidemic in our society and bred by our culture.

Narcissism is rooted in the ancient myth of a young man named Narcissus who was very good looking—and knew it. He regularly spurned others in relationships. One day, he caught sight of his own reflection in a pond and fell so in love with himself that he forgot everyone and everything, even to eat. He starved to death.

There's nothing wrong, of course, with a healthy self-image. Nor is it a sin to be confident. But people suffering from what psychologists call Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) take these things to extremes.

Some of the signs of NPD are: an exaggerated sense of self-importance; fantasies of unlimited success and adulation; belief that one is not only special but unique and more special than everybody else; a sense of entitlement; a willingness to exploit others without guilt or remorse; and, perhaps most disturbing, an utter lack of empathy.

Narcissism is bad news for a relationship, and experts have deemed NPD to be incurable. If you're with a narcissist, they say, you have but two courses of action: (1) escape; or (2) be prepared to be used and abused.

Narcissism may be considered by some to be an epidemic but it certainly isn't new. As our scripture readings today remind us, it is a very real temptation; but it also has a ready cure.

All of us have the potential to become spiritual narcissists, to think or at least pretend that we "have it all together" and that the rest of the universe revolves around us. In today's gospel reading Jesus notes four things that can be blessings but can also be traps: riches; security; joy; and having the esteem of others.

“Wait a minute,” you might say to yourself, “I wouldn’t mind being rich! With all that’s going on in the economy these days there are millions of people, including me, who would *love* to feel a little more secure. What’s wrong with feeling joy or having others think well of me?” Nothing, really.

The problem, Jesus knew, was not in money, security, joy or popularity in themselves. Rather it’s where they can take us. Today, just as in Jesus’ day, money is power; and we human beings don’t always handle power very well. From the Wall Street executives who receive multimillion dollar bonuses within months of having their banks and companies bailed out by taxpayers, to the dictators in other countries who rig elections and jail or kill their opponents, to religious leaders who abuse their authority, money and power can drive us to forget the needs of others.

The drive for security can lead us to hoard what we have or to avoid risking anything, even when it might help someone else. Our desire for joy can lead to making happiness an idol and an unhealthy expectation or demand that we be happy all the time. In order to achieve such a state, some people will even resort to substances or behaviors that become addictions. The desire to please others can, at its extremes, kill our own consciences. We can choose what is popular instead of what is right.

As Jesus points out in the gospel, there’s a price to be paid for all of this. In the short term, it might lead to wealth and fame; but in the realm of eternity we might find ourselves alone, separated from others and God.

There’s nothing inherently virtuous in poverty, hunger, mourning or being hated by others. In fact, it’s perfectly normal to try to avoid those things! One thing they can do, however, is challenge any excessive pride or delusions that we may have about our self-sufficiency. When we are poor, hungry, mourning or persecuted, we often have to lean on others for help. More importantly, we can also lean on God.

It’s when we place our trust in God and in doing his will, our first reading and responsorial psalm assure us, that we can survive those times of heat and drought—when the money runs out; when we feel insecure; when we’re sad or even depressed; and when others use or hurt us. Even more, we can continue to bear abundant fruit because our roots are not in ourselves but in the One who has saved us and continues to draw us to the waters of life. +