

Deacon Joe is a deacon helping out at the Navy Academy. He and his wife Julia led the RCIA program for those learning about the Catholic faith. Fr. Foley said frequently that Deacon Joe, originally from the Newark Archdiocese, was one of the best deacons he ever worked with. (Of course, Fr. Foley never met our outstanding deacons here at St. Catherine.) Deacon Joe was always ready to serve. A family man, for years he commuted to work in the city raising a great family, first into New York City, and then Washington DC. One of his daughters was and F-18 pilot.

There was just one problem: Deacon Joe was a Tax lawyer. (wink wink) And Fr. Foley, Fr. Eric and I would joke mercilessly with Deacon Joe about him being a lawyer. We'd be sitting at dinner and talking about the Sunday gospel and ask, "Didn't St. Paul say that God desires all people to be saved... well except lawyers." Or maybe at mass, I'd include a joke, like "What do you call one million lawyers at the bottom of the ocean? ... A good start" and then I would look over at Deacon Joe as he would shake his head.

But he was always a good sport, when we would give him a hard time and he would joke right back. It was all in good fun and we enjoyed working together.

Now this might be a funny story about how we singled out Deacon Joe based on a characteristic – his job. But many times, we single out people based on a characteristic – maybe their political beliefs, or their religion, or their skin color, or sexual preference, or an illness they have. We make them into lepers.

Lepers suffered from a terrible disease that would rot away their skin, they would have open sores and would lose fingers and toes. It was awful. In the ancient Jewish world, if someone was diagnosed as having leprosy, they would be considered unclean and be ostracized from the community. They would have to cross on the other side of the road and yell "unclean! Unclean!" to warn people to stay away. They were not welcome in the synagogue or temple. It must have been a terrible and lonely existence.

Now the people we alienate today do not have the disease of leprosy, but we can still sometimes blow it out of proportion, by focusing on that undesired characteristic and alienate that person or a group of people with the same characteristic. We can start to see them as NOT people, but only see the characteristic – that person is middle eastern, watch out! That person is transgender, and therefore not welcome here. That person is a republican, or democrat or an immigrant or not cool so I will avoid them. Maybe I will gossip to my friends about him or her.

But does this behavior line up with the teachings of Jesus? Do they follow the Law of loving our neighbor as ourselves? Do they follow the Golden Rule to “Treat others as we wish to be treated?”

During this Respect Life Month, we are to promote the value and gift of every life.

We can see in our culture a dichotomy of valuing life. Certain lives are valued and protected. Others can be put into a category of less valued. Perhaps their rights are less guaranteed.

We can think of the unborn. Where a mother gets to choose whether to value that life. If she desires them, they are a child and to be protected. If she does not want the child, they are not even considered a life, rather they are considered an unbearable burden.

But just because someone wants or does not want a person, that does not make them less of a person. What do we use to declare a life? Unique fingerprints, breathing, a heartbeat, right? Doesn't that apply across that board? Or do we say “we'll, yes there's a heartbeat, but that's not a life.” There's no logic, no consistency.

The same applies at End of Life. We are to value the gift of life until natural death. We are never to cause death intentionally. Yet we can say – “oh this life is no longer useful or no longer worth living, so that is an exception.”

But that is not true. A life is a life. Again, the golden rule “Treat others as we wish to be treated.” We do not wish to be devalued. We wish to be loved, cherished, respected.

And guess what? God loves us, cherishes us, values us. Because he can see all time, at the beginning of time, he saw us being conceived, and he specially created a soul for each one of us. So that there would only ever be one of us. We are unique. We are special. We are loved and valued. We are a gift.

In the same way we are to recognize each person we meet as special, as a gift.

- Yes, even when your little brother steals your toys – he is a gift. He is special, he is to be loved and cherished.
- Your soon-to-be-ex-wife has a good lawyer. She is special and to be loved and cherished.
- The immigrant in the neighboring town working 16-hour days to support their young family is to be loved and cherished.
- The guy who tries to clean your windshield before you get to the Lincoln Tunnel is special and is to be loved and cherished.
- The person that just cut you off on the Parkway is special and is to be loved and cherished not chased down the highway in a fit of road rage.

There are many opportunities to label people as “lepers” – undesirables, unwanted. There are equally as many opportunities to recognize each person and convey to them that they have value. I asked recently at a wedding: “what is the message you want your spouse to know at the end of the day or after a fight? That they are wrong, or annoying? OR - That they are special, loved and cherished?”

Your kid brings home a report card with a “C.” What do you want them to know?

- You are special. You are loved and cherished.

When you look in the mirror after a particularly trying day – what does God want you to know?

- You are special. You are loved and cherished.

This week, let us look for ways to use our many opportunities to affirm the value of the lives we encounter. Let us take the time to communicate that life is sacred and special and that the person in front of us is a gift.