

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B (January 29, 2012)

We all go to the grocery store but we pay little attention to the bagger. I heard the story of a bagger named Johnny who quietly challenged people to look at their lives differently. A particular large grocery store wanted its employees to build customer loyalty and so they hired an expensive financial consultant to help. This person offered many helpful hints on how to build customer satisfaction, but as she was creating a grand plan, another person, Johnny, was doing something quite revolutionary in a quiet sort of way.

He got the idea that he could make a difference in customers' lives by giving them one simple thought for the day that might change how they see life...their lives...for the better. Every night he would come up with a "thought for the day" from something he had heard or read; if he couldn't find one, he went on the computer with the help of his dad. He printed the "thought" that was repeated over the length of the paper, he made copies and then proceeded to cut them apart and sign his name on the back of each little slip of paper thanking customers for coming to the store.

Can you imagine what happened? People started to line up in Johnny's checkout lane to get his "thought for the day;" they even called the store thanking the manager for this wonderful employee who gave them a thought that allowed them to think more positively about themselves and their lives. Other employees also started to come up with their own ideas on how to make a difference in people's lives.

This young man, Johnny, had Down syndrome, and his words were prophetic: the words of the prophet help us to see reality in a new, more creative way...a way that sees God at the center.

Moses tells the people that God will raise a prophet from among their own kinsmen and God will put words on this prophet's lips that will change people's lives. In the gospel, Jesus reveals himself to be that prophet, the one who speaks with authority. Those who listen to Him will be changed. A man possessed appears in the synagogue and Jesus "knows" the evil spirits, who in turn, know the identity of Jesus as the Holy One of God." Jesus speaks one sentence that changes the man's life forever: "Be quiet and come out of the man." This simple command frees the man and changes the way he sees his life forever.

Johnny gave customers a simple thought that banished all the negative thoughts that hound us all: thoughts of how busy we are; how little time we have; where life is going; angry or bitter feelings about a loved one. These thoughts can possess our minds and control our awareness. What we need is a thought or a command to free us from the thoughts that hinder our growth in God.

Jesus is our prophet who speaks to us through Scripture and he strengthens us through the meal of this Eucharist. He wants us to leave this worship on a mission: to listen to the voices that speak prophetic words of freedom. Christ speaks to us through the many people we meet in our average, ordinary day, like Johnny. But Jesus wants us to take it one step further: what words can I say that might change a person's day...or life?