

**26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 27, 2009**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

Harry S. Truman is rather famously credited with having once said: “It’s amazing how much you can accomplish when it doesn’t matter who gets the credit.” It seems he must have borrowed the line from either Moses or Jesus. They both say essentially the same thing in today’s readings.

It is equally amazing just how much “getting the credit” for doing a good deed really does matter to so many of us. It did matter to Moses’ friends in the dessert. Eldad and Medad were not part of their group of seventy prophets. They were “unauthorized” prophets. And it did matter to Jesus’ disciples. No strange exorcist was welcome in their gang either.

It does matter to most of us who gets the credit. Many of us are constantly evaluating, judging, and weighing our own lives in comparison with someone else. Who “gets the credit” becomes very important. After all is said and done, I want to know my relative place in the scheme of things. Where do I rank in comparison to others? Where will my place be in the line-up to the pearly gates? And who will be much further back—behind me? Oh, I can already think of some names....

And then along comes Jesus’ gospel, and it can get very upsetting. My

mother used to have a phrase she used a lot when talking about people she really didn't like. She would say: "Well, she's a strange bird." Or sometimes even: "He's a funny duck." (I have no idea why she picked on birds so often.) I thought of the "strange bird" or "funny duck" when I read today's readings. With no disrespect intended, I submit to you that Jesus comes off as a very strange bird indeed. He tosses the whole careful hierarchy of "who-gets-credit-for-what" upside down. And it's very sobering.

Jesus actually thinks that it's "the little ones," the children, the "least among us" who will be at the front of the line in the end. How dare he? That's not fair! Surely my wealth, or my position in life, or my pedigree, or my piety must count for something important. Maybe it's my degrees; God, I hope degrees count for something—I spent so much time earning them.

But Jesus has a different agenda. He says whoever is not against us is for us. It doesn't matter who gets the credit. It's about the Kingdom, stupid! It's about how many cups of cold water you offered to a stranger. It's about being the servant of the most. It's about all the "little ones," whom Jesus calls generically "the poor."

Whatever keeps us from serving each other—even in the most pedestrian ways—needs to be cut out and cut off. Just as you might cut off an eye or a

foot. There is only one Kingdom, one goal, one God to serve. And that God is, Jesus shows us in the flesh, a strange bird too.

In a different church era, one that many of us will remember too well, today's readings would have spawned a thousand sermons on hell-fire and brimstone. Preachers particularly like St. James' letter casting "woes" upon the wealthy and upon the unjust businessmen of his time. But most of the churches have only slowly learned something a good psychologist could have told them a while ago: fear is not actually a very good motivator. Fear does not get people to do more good things. Fear usually just forces people to avoid getting caught doing bad things.

Jesus has a whole different agenda. His agenda is much more interior, much more subtle, much more difficult actually. The only standard by which each one of us will be held accountable in the end is internal. It is already written in our hearts. And as Jesus says elsewhere: "only your Father who is in secret will see your goodness." Funny duck, indeed!

And so remember: the criteria for "getting credit" in the Kingdom , before God and each other is stranger than we might ever guess. It is often as simple as a glass of water to a child. And Moses, Jesus, and Harry Truman are right: "It's amazing what you can accomplish when it doesn't matter who

gets the credit.”