

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 2 March 2025 + Sir 27 + I Cor 15:54-58 + Luke 6:39-45

As we all know, Lent is just around the corner. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, a day of fasting and abstaining from meat, and begins our 40-some day long opportunity to turn away from sin so as to turn back to the Lord. Our readings today offer us many powerful reflections on the spiritual life, so I thought we might use them as a sort of examination of conscience, to help us zero in on what we want to focus on individually this Lent.

So let's just take them in order. First, our speech. We hear in Sirach that *one's speech discloses the bent of one's mind*. The Lord expands upon this idea in our Gospel today: *from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks*. And so if my heart is full of bitterness and anger, it will at some point boil over into my speech, with likely destructive consequences. How many of us have had a bad day changed instantly into a good one from one kind word uttered to us? On the flip side, how has one little hurtful word caused us a mountain of pain? Does my mouth curse, or does it bless? Do I reverence the holy name of God?

So if our speech destroys rather than edifies, what can we do? Well, the first step in changing the heart, the font of all speech, is prayer. Every morning, we might pray Psalm 141 v. 3 which says, *Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!* If we do this, we not only open ourselves up to grace, but also start the day with mindfulness of the power of our words.

Another idea comes from our responsorial Psalm today, Psalm 92: *It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praise to your name, Most High*. How often do we take time to specifically thank and praise God? That's another great way to start the day, which is why the Psalmist continues: *[it is good] to proclaim your kindness at dawn and your faithfulness throughout the night*. If we think of God's goodness in the morning and at night, hopefully we will think less of the problems or evils that get our tongues into trouble.

And that brings us to our next consideration: what occupies the thoughts of my heart? In our 2nd reading today from St. Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians, we heard, *When this which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then...Death is swallowed up in victory*. So, do I spend more time focusing on that which is corruptible and mortal—my appearance, money, popularity, prestige, toys—or that which is incorrupt and immortal—my soul, and the souls of those around me?

It's not easy to do this, because right now we still live on earth, not in heaven. We have bills to pay, mouths to feed, work to do. But in the midst of all of our needful things, do we remember that the Lord is with us? St. Paul goes on in our 2nd reading: *be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain*. So we might ask, am I laboring for the Lord, or am I working for this life only? Do I continue to serve the Lord even when I do not see the fruit of my labors? Do I allow discouragement to get me down? Do I work for the glory of God, or for the praise of others?

On to our Gospel today, which prompts us to ask, what am I looking at? In this well-known Gospel, Jesus reminds us to pay attention to the wooden beam in our own eyes, before we point out the splinter in our neighbor's eye. The image is a little over the top, which is exactly the point. How often do we find fault with others—spouses, children, extended family members, co-workers, neighbors, friends, politicians—you name it, and fail to realize I am by no means perfect myself! Do I ever pray for those with whom I disagree?

But I think we can extend this image even further. That is by asking the more general question, what am I looking at, or what am I looking for? Do I only look for problems, for the negative? Do I ever look for the good in others? Do I recognize the blessings and beauty of the world all around me? Do I see others as I should see myself; that is, a unique, irreplaceable child of God, made in His own image and likeness? Or do I see others basically as objects, as a means to make me happy?

There is a great movie that came out many years ago called “The Tree of Life.” The beautiful opening monologue begins with a comparison of the way of nature (we might say fallen human nature), with the way of grace. *Nature*, the narrator says, *finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things.* I have pondered this line many times: *nature finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And God's love is smiling through all things.* It's true!

We might also point out here that the average American spends 7 hours a day looking at a screen! 7 hours! That is nearly half of our waking hours. So speaking of our viewing habits, do I look at garbage? If I do, I can't be surprised if I am failing to see God in my neighbor, to see all the world shining around me, and love smiling through all things. Jesus says in the Beatitudes, *blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God!*

Finally, Jesus says in our Gospel today that *every tree is known by its own fruit.* So we might ask, am I bearing rotten fruit, or good fruit? To make this question more concrete, we can look to ch 5 of St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians (vv. 19-23), which contrasts the works of the flesh or “rotten fruit,” with the fruits of the Holy Spirit—good fruit. The works of the flesh, he says, are *sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry... strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness;* whereas the fruits of the Spirit are *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

So how do we bear good fruit? Well, Jesus says in John ch. 15, *If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit...by this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples* (vv 5, 8). Sometimes when we examine our lives like this, we might feel a little overwhelmed with the reality we are not Saints just yet. But as we said earlier, the first step in the road to holiness is always prayer—that's how we remain in Jesus. And that's also why we are focusing on mental prayer this Lent as a parish. Because the goal of Lent is not human perfection: the goal of Lent is abiding communion with God.