

8th Sunday Ordinary Time “C”

March 2-3, 2019

Readings: Sirach 27:4-7; 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45

It is difficult to forget one’s first paycheck. While I mowed lawns for several years as a young teenager, my first “real job” in high school was working at the neighborhood Snyder’s drugstore for a whopping \$2.90 per hour. I gained a little spending money along with a few valuable lessons. I also became surprised at customer’s reading habits while ringing up their orders. Q: Guess which magazines sold out earliest each week? A: Hands down, the tabloids, the kingpins of gossipy journalism.

We Americans feed off of gossip, our voracious appetite for it knows no end, and often we priests can be among the worst offenders. We speculate as to whom will be asked to go here or there. While not necessarily being malicious, it is worth evaluating our motives. Why are we discussing it?

Our first reading today is taken from the book of Sirach, written by a wise and pious Jew approximately 200 years before Christ. He clearly is making a reference to gossip, without naming it as such. He says, “so too does one's speech disclose the bent of one's mind.” In other words, it is in our speech that we are tested.

The derivation of the word “gossip” is as a noun from the old English *god* + *sibb*, meaning God plus related, as in the word sibling. It referred a godparent, a close friend or neighbor, such as those invited to a Baptism. It later became extended to the idea that the conversation of close friends is not always productive speech... It often became idle speech.

The irony of course is that gossip is anything but connected with godly pursuits– it is precisely the opposite. Indeed, God is testing us by our speech; he will judge us according to our deeds. We were given the power of speech first and foremost so that we would honor God by praising Him, by praying to Him for our needs, by thanking him for His gifts, and by making those graces known to others, for their benefit.

The second purpose of God-given speech is so that we can live in social harmony with our fellow human beings. No one can live in isolation from this world; we live in community and so we must strive to characterize our relationships by truth and integrity. Too often, we have turned our creation into a modern Tower of Babel, with a virtual cacophony of sounds all competing with one another for attention, for the big scoop.

The Lord is calling us this day to remove the plank from our own eye before pointing the finger at another. This does not mean that we have no right to judge a particular action as either moral or immoral. It simply means that we mustn't fail to look inwardly in the midst of that process. We change the world one person at a time, beginning with ourselves.

Sirach was about the same business 2200 years ago when he wrote under God's inspiration. He did so in order to encourage his fellow Jews who were being threatened with many new ideas and influences. Some of these were contrary to the mandates of the Judaic law. Resist those influences, he said. Resist unclean speech, the Lord begs us.

You will be known by the fruit that your tree bears. Gossipy speech produces nothing but rotten fruit. A noted bishop and preacher of an earlier generation is attributed with saying:

“When our conscience bothers us, whether we admit it or not, we often try to justify it by correcting others, or by finding fault with them. The readiness to believe evil about others is in large part ammunition for a thousand scandals in our own hearts.”¹

A good conscience produces God-like speech, concerning itself with spreading the love of Jesus, of looking into our own hearts with an honest and critical eye. This is a message that we can feel proud to spread.

¹ Quotation attributed to Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *The World's First Love: Mary, Mother of God* (1952, reprinted 1996 Ignatius Press, San Francisco) but exact citation not found therein.

As we look ahead to the beginning of Lent this week, we will be given precious time. May we use this time to take stock, not just of some of our bad habits, but to really look inward to make needed changes.

Change cannot happen overnight; we will have the luxury of time if we choose to use it wisely. May God guard our speech, placing a sentry at the door of our lips.² Above all, may we honor God by means of our speech.

² Cf. Psalm 141:3