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It seems to me that we often tend to hear the Gospel too piously. I don't mean that we shouldn't take it seriously, but Jesus had a great sense of humor and we tend to suffocate it with overly solemn renderings of his preaching. When I picture a scene in which Jesus preached today's Gospel, I wonder if he might have blindfolded a couple of kids to illustrate his point. He could have given them a few dizzying turns and then invited them to amble down a narrow path alongside a canal. With nothing to hold on to but one another, they were well assured of tripping or taking a quick dunk — not too unlike Matthew's story of Peter's performance as he walked the waves toward Jesus.

If folks didn't get the point with the first picture, it was impossible to miss the idea when the carpenter's son drew an example from his dad's workshop, suggesting that somebody who had a roof beam protruding from his eye would have a hard time helping a companion who suffered from a speck of sawdust in his own. (A humorous catechetical variation on this might be to challenge a young person to hold the largest exercise ball he or she can manage and to take a marble from the hand of another child without dropping the ball.)

A significant element of Jesus' teaching technique was to make people laugh — at themselves and at the pretentiousness of folks who tried to awe them with

highfalutin concepts and impossible legalisms. His parables were multilayered riddles designed to entice his audience into seeing things differently — over and over again. When we head down the path that Jesus opens with this little example, we find ourselves in puzzling ambiguity. We get the urge to ask: “If I am blind, how do I know whether or not the person guiding me is blind or sighted? If someone really wants to lead me, is she or he likely to admit to blindness?”

Pondering this question reminded me of a conversation among vocation directors who were discussing racism in religious communities. One said, “Well, I can’t just ask a candidate if he’s a racist, can I?” The group chuckled, and then one said, “Perhaps that is exactly what we should do.” Her explanation was that the racism that mars our society has inevitably marked all of us in some way. If we admit that we have been affected by it, we can be alert to it and strive to overcome it. If we assume that we are unmarked by the racism some call the original sin of the United States, it is likely to control us without our being aware of it.

The idea of racism as a structural sin that permeates society leads to the consideration of similar evils that permeate our social life and institutions. Those would include materialism, (hetero) sexism, consumerism, individualism and other similar attitudes that blunt our consciousness by their prevalence, thereby leaving us blind to aberrations that have become societally acceptable.

The Gospel for this Sunday calls us to question the opinions we hold and to be cautious about where we look for guidance. The quest for a good guide is far from easy. Bertrand Russell is quoted as saying, “Fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.” That is a fine summary of his agnosticism but also a reminder that believers need a good dose of humility whenever they purport to speak of the things of God. Jesus didn’t promise to give anyone perfect knowledge or judgment, only the power to forgive without limits — a faculty that presumes that we all make a good share of mistakes.

Today’s Gospel suggests that we trust our individual and collective judgments as completely as we would trust a blind guide. The one thing that might lead us to trust such a guide would be her admission that she is blind. That would induce us to assume a solid share of the responsibility for determining the route we are to take. As that happens, we will find ourselves transformed from being guides and followers into fellow discerners. We will rely on more than our own point of view. Admitting that we are blind, we will learn to be cautious about the road to take, aware that we

cannot know all about it. We will also lean on one another, ready to catch or be caught when something trips one of us up.

Maybe Jesus was actually encouraging us to be blind guides, ready to admit our incapacity so that we could help one another and become open to broader, deeper visions.

SIRACH 27:4-7

Ben Sira, the author of the Book of Sirach, was something of a popular philosopher of the second century before the time of Christ. The purpose of his writing was not to put forth a particular system of thought or retell scriptural traditions, but rather to harmonize and synthesize what the tradition had given him in inheritance. His goal was to harmonize the Mosaic tradition of salvation history with the wisdom traditions that focused more on creation. The Book of Sirach is also called Ecclesiasticus because of its use by the church of the early centuries as a source of moral teaching. Sirach is accepted as part of the canon of Scripture by the Catholic tradition but not by some others.

The introduction to the Book of Sirach explains that Ben Sira's grandson collected his writings for posterity. That suggests that we might listen to the readings as if we were hearing an ancient grandfather sitting on the porch with his pipe and giving us thoughts to live by.

Ben Sira created the first of the aphorisms we hear today by combining what he saw in the kitchen with what he heard around the town square. Long before Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Ben Sira understood the idea of psychological projection: When you critique others, you are often revealing your own faults.

Then moving from food preparation to the art studio, he considered how moldable clay takes a definitive shape when it goes through the firing oven. Just so, he says, people who want to be ethical will only see their potential fulfilled when it is tried and tested.

Finally, in what seems to be the inverse of much traditional wisdom, Ben Sira advises us to withhold judgment on people until we hear what they have to say. Suggesting that our words come from our inner being, this might double back on the first saying, indicating that gossips are often quick to catch someone whose error is a mirror of their own. The same principle would demonstrate that people note and

praise in others what they value for their own life. Sirach's homey wisdom is part of the tradition from which Jesus drew his store of sayings.

PSALM 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16

Psalm 92 is traditionally prayed as part of the Sabbath service. The selection we pray this Sunday begins by addressing God, saying how good it is to give public thanks to God. Thinking of this as a communal prayer, we might look around as we sing, to notice who is there with us singing God's praise. The Judeo-Christian tradition understands communal prayer as an integral part of religious practice. We need to pray individually and privately, but our personal prayer and our communal prayer complement one another. Communal prayer buoys our faith as we realize that we are not alone in our belief or in trying to live the life that flows from it. Thus, we begin this Sabbath prayer together, remembering that we begin and end all our days with praise.

The second verse of today's liturgical psalm claims that the just will flourish to become as elegant as the palm trees, as strong as the cedars. This is not the promise that nothing will ever happen to them, but a recognition of the beauty of the life of truly good people and of the strength one acquires through faithful prayer and relationship with God.

The first sentence of the last verse expresses every person's hope to avoid the ravages of a frail old age. On one hand, the phrase "They shall bear fruit even in old age" might be understood to refer to people like Abraham and Sarah. More frequently, it applies to the elders, the grandparents, the wise and wizened seniors who know how to give the right doses of support and guidance to the young. They are the people who can demonstrate that one does not need a great deal of physical strength to remain vigorous and sturdy.

The final lines give a key to the wisdom of the whole psalm. Blessed are we when we honestly call God our rock, when we have learned to get our strength from God's unfailing love rather than from our plans, schemes or abilities. Blessed will we be as we sing and pray this psalm together and accept its invitation to share our faith more deeply with one another.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:54-58

On our last Sunday before Lent, we again hear Paul talk about Christ's resurrection. As we have seen, the truth of bodily resurrection is absolutely key to him. For Paul, Christ's bodily resurrection and our own are intricately interrelated. If Christ is not raised, our faith is in vain. And if Christ is raised, then we too will enter into a transformed/resurrected form of existence.

As we have seen, the Resurrection, like the Incarnation, is an affirmation of creation itself. This life of ours, even with its frail flesh, is not headed for the garbage heap of the universe, but somehow destined for eternal union with God in Christ. The fact that we know this much about where we are going, calls for a transformation in our thinking about who we are and how we live.

In this week's reading, Paul focuses on the impotence of death in the light of Christ's resurrection. Reinterpreting a phrase from Hosea (13:14), Paul speaks of death as an entity defeated by Christ. He takes an idea about death as a punishment and inverts it to taunt death itself. Francis of Assisi took this one step further because he believed that no one and no thing is our enemy, but all are our benefactors when seen in God's light. Thus, Francis could welcome death as a sister who would carry him into an unknown which would be better than he could imagine.

We might ask ourselves what this reading offers us today. At the very least, it urges us to consider what we believe about resurrection and eternal life. Pushing us far beyond the idea of spring flowers and bunnies, it calls us to consider the real transformation that awaits us and how to let it begin to happen.

In order to grapple with that idea, we might consider any experience we have had of transformation. Transformation is not simply growth, the replacement of baby teeth with our adult set or the normal changes that happen as we move from childhood through adolescence, adulthood and then into what Latin Americans call "the third age." Some people may recognize that they have been transformed through the process of becoming a spouse and/or parent or close friend. Taking on those roles changes one's identity in ways that cannot be anticipated and perhaps never described adequately. In a similar way, religious experience can be transformative. Grace overtakes us in an encounter that changes our orientation to life in ways we often can't explain.

Those experiences are part of the "already" of eternal life in Christ. We know the life-giving power of love and are changed by it. At the same time, what we know

now is only a foretaste, still conditioned by ordinary existence. That implies that just as we must nourish friendships and spousal or parental relationships, we cannot take the life of grace for granted as a once-for-all happening. Thus, says Paul, we need to be firm, always devoted to the work of grace in our world, and do everything with the assurance that, although we are incapable of understanding how, our dedication and efforts will not be in vain.

LUKE 6:39-45

As Luke begins to wind down the Sermon on the Plain, he quotes a number of wisdom sayings that Jesus probably repeated time and again. Silvano Fausti, an Italian Jesuit Scripture scholar, tells us that the sayings we hear today elucidate Jesus' command in Luke 6:36: "Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful."

When we allow that command to be the interpretive lens through which to understand this passage, we are led to ask what blindness Jesus is talking about. True, he may have used the phrase as a gimmick to get his audience's eyes to sparkle with humor, but that was simply his way to prepare them for what he wanted them to grapple with as they listened and then again, as they went along the way home. Fausti suggests that the blind guides to whom Jesus refers are the leaders who don't know their own need for mercy, who have not experienced mercy, and who therefore cannot act with mercy.

This passage uses a typical "sandwich" technique in which Jesus says two things about seeing and between them talks about disciples and teachers. In this technique, the middle idea is key, and the other two illuminate it. The middle idea here has to do with disciples learning from the master in order to slowly become like the master. That leads us to look at the mercy with which Jesus called people beyond their faults. Whether with humor, compassion or harsh sayings, Jesus called people forth with the intent to open them up to new possibilities. The only people Jesus ever called condemned were those who chose to ignore his invitation and refused to admit their need for conversion and growth. (See John 9:41)

With the example of the blind leading the blind, Jesus uses humor to point out the deadly seriousness of the situation in which people find themselves when they accept false guides. The very example shows the craziness of the situation: A person with something protruding from his eye cannot come close enough to another nor see the other clearly enough to help. Therein lies a key dimension of the problem.

The person with a beam in the eye does not see another clearly; only a person who looks on another with the clarity of compassion has what is necessary to help the other grow.

People who have admitted their own sinfulness and have grasped the saving hand that helped them move forward are the ones who can help another — they know what it feels like to have a blinding beam removed from their eye. In his book about addictions, *Breathing Under Water*, Richard Rohr speaks of something like this when he says: “God seems to have hidden holiness and wholeness in a secret place where only the humble will find it.” This is something that people discover in 12-step groups or from reading the autobiographies of the saints. It seems that the closer people get to God, the humbler they become.

Today’s Gospel is actually a summary of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain and its reversals of common knowledge. The blind guides he warns us about are those who think they see clearly. The people who admit their limited vision and minuscule understanding of God’s ways are the ones whom we can trust to orient us toward the mysteries God wants to reveal to us.

Planning: Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Lawrence Mick

This last Sunday before Lent offers us a rich array of themes that lead us right into this season of conversion and renewal.

The first reading raises the issue of speech and how what we say reveals our faults. We may try to avoid this by lying, of course, but that just adds to the faults we need to admit. These words might prompt us to think about the sacrament of reconciliation. Speaking our faults in confession should be an integral part of the season of Lent. Can that idea find its way into the petitions today, perhaps praying that we will use Lent as a time to prepare to speak our truth in the sacrament?

In a very different way, the second reading invites us to embrace the Lenten journey with confidence. Admitting our sinfulness is a kind of death to self, but Paul insists that death has lost its sting because of the resurrection of Christ. “Where, O death, is your victory? ... But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord

Jesus Christ.”

The Gospel calls us to self-examination. What kind of fruit are we producing in our lives? What changes are needed? This passage also reminds us not to spend our time judging the faults of others but to remove the beam from our own eyes. That is good advice at any time of the year, but it also sets the stage for celebrating the scrutinies with the elect during Lent. We can only hold them up as examples of the need for continued conversion if we admit that we all are in need of such spiritual growth.

These themes provide plenty of material for preachers this weekend, but they also provide ideas for the petitions. The general intercessions are intended to be part of our response to what we have heard in the word of God. The more you can use language and images from the readings in crafting the petitions, the clearer that connection becomes.

Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, which usually draws large numbers of worshipers.

Discuss with the pastor what schedule would best accommodate those who want to start Lent with the Eucharist as well as those who may only come for the distribution of ashes in the context of a Liturgy of the Word. Don't forget those who are unable to come to church because of illness or age. Can the ashes be taken to them in a similar service of prayer?

Prayers: Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Sue Robb_

Introduction

On this Sunday before Lent, the readings challenge us to be mindful of our thoughts, words and deeds. They call us to first judge ourselves before we judge others. May God shake us from our sins of apathy and judgment, so as to provide a path to enter more deeply into the Lenten journey before us.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, your words fill us with spirit and life: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, your actions teach us how to love and forgive: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, your very life shows us how to live in communion with one another: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray to respond to the needs of others more quickly and generously than we respond to our own.

Minister For those in church leadership who are fearful and resistant to change; for those who have left the church or feel alienated by it, we pray:

- For elected leaders, for truthful dialogue among all representatives of political parties and, for the enactment of just laws that protect the least among us, for transparency in government, we pray:
- For the wisdom to listen compassionately, to judge gently and to endure tribulations faithfully, we pray:
- For those who suffer from the effects of harsh weather, natural disasters and poor living condition, we pray:
- For those marginalized due to race, gender, ethnicity, social status, religious beliefs, political affiliations and all other forms of prejudice; for the grace to see how we marginalize others, we pray:
- For the intercession of St. Katharine Drexel, whom the church remembers on this day as the patron saint of racial justice and philanthropists; for an ability to give our wealth and resources to those in need, we pray:
- For comfort to those who suffer from chronic disease; for those who cannot afford or do not have access to life-saving medical treatment; for all medical professionals who work tirelessly to heal, we pray:
- For all who are in prison; for healing and peace for victims of crime, and for all who have died, especially those who have died violent deaths, we pray:

Presider God of love, hear these prayers and guide us to an ever-deepening awareness of your will. Help us remove the beams in our own eyes so we may better serve others. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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