

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
Fr. Chad S. Green
Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
3 March 2019

Sirach 27:4-7
Psalm 92
1 Corinthians 15:54-58
(Philippians 2:15d, 16a) Luke 6:39-45

Bear Good Fruit

This coming week we begin Lent on Ash Wednesday. It's not a Holy Day of Obligation but, curiously, it's one of the most popular liturgical days of the year. Here at Holy Family we'll have three Masses throughout the day, plus a midday liturgy. I expect all of them will be well attended. In the busyness of daily life, it happens that midweek Holy Days get overlooked sometimes. But that doesn't tend to happen with Ash Wednesday. There's something about Ash Wednesday, that we don't forget about it.

Years ago, before I was in seminary, my manager from my former job explained why she thought Ash Wednesday was so popular. Although she was Catholic, she didn't go to church regularly. But she *did* go to Mass on Ash Wednesday. The reason she liked to go to Mass on Ash Wednesday – and why she thought so many others did, as well – was because, she said, “You get something at Ash Wednesday Mass.” And, frankly, she liked to get something. Never mind that the “something” is a Cross-shaped smear of ashes on your forehead. She liked it, and she supposed many other people liked it, too.

It's funny to think that getting something – even getting something like *ashes* – would be such an attraction. But I think she had a point. Maybe getting something – something different; something out of the ordinary – *is* appealing to us.

But perhaps there's also something deeper happening. Maybe it's not just that we get something different on Ash Wednesday. Maybe Ash Wednesday's popularity – the way it attracts so many people in a way that other liturgical days do not – maybe this *reveals* something

about us. Maybe something that's deep inside us emerges or pops up whenever Ash Wednesday and Lent come around each year.¹

+++

Today's First Reading and Gospel are about this very thing: what *reveals* what's inside of us. The First Reading from Sirach points to our speech as revealing: "One's faults [appear] when one speaks."² "One's speech discloses the [shape] of one's mind."³

And Jesus expands on this in His Sermon on the Plain with the example of a tree and its fruit: "A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its fruit."⁴

And we all recognize in ourselves the paradox that each of us can in one moment be a good tree bearing good fruit, and in another moment be a rotten tree bearing rotten fruit. Sometimes we say and do things that bless others and bring God's Love into the world, and sometimes we say and do things that hurt others and reveal our faults to the world.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche Community, described this paradox in this way:

We human beings are a mixture
of the presence of God and the absence of God,
of light and darkness,
truth and chaos,
goodness and evil,
openness and closedness.
No human being in himself or herself is holy or pure.
We become holy only through the holiness of God.

By ourselves we cannot bridge the gap that separates
the finite from the Infinite.
God reaches out to us and we become holy
as we welcome God who comes to us.

This implies that we gradually become emptied
of the darkness and selfishness in us,
and liberated from the walls around our hearts
that separate us from God, from others and from our deepest self.

This holiness is not something we can achieve; it is *given*.
It is not reserved for a few strong-willed people,
for austere seekers of God,
for those who have an official role in the Church,
or for those who preach and do advanced theological studies.
It is not reserved for those who are well-known mystics
or for those who do wonderful things for the poor.
Holiness is for all those who are poor enough to welcome Jesus.
It is for people living ordinary lives and who feel lonely.
It is for all those who are old, sick, hospitalized or out of work,
who open their hearts in trust to Jesus
and cry out for his healing love.
“Come, Lord Jesus, come!”⁵

What Vanier is pointing out – what we all recognize in ourselves – what is revealed by our words and actions – is that we are a mixture of good fruit and rotten fruit. And what our response to Ash Wednesday reveals to us, is that we realize this mixture exists in us, and we know that – no matter who we are or what our circumstances are in life – we all need God to help us. We all need Our Savior to help us cut out the rotten fruit, and produce more good fruit.

+++

So, where do we begin? How do we start cutting out the rotten fruit and producing the good fruit? Rotten fruit doesn't come from nowhere...so where does it come from? To answer these questions, I propose that Lent is a good time to look at what we're *feeding* our souls. What kind of movies, television shows, news programs, and even commercials do I watch? What kind of magazines, books, blogs, and websites do I read? What kind of songs do I listen to?

Some of these are very well made, critically-acclaimed, artistic, thought-provoking, award-winning, and funny. But even these types of shows, books, and songs can be laced with cruel humor, impure images, hatred, and violence. Then we have to wonder, what kind of fruit are they *revealing* to us? And, more importantly, what kind of seeds are they *planting* in us?

Now, I'm not proposing a ban on any specific shows, movies, music, or other media. I'm simply encouraging you to ask that question for yourself. More importantly, to ask the Holy Spirit to help you take a look at your media intake. And maybe consider cutting some of these back or eliminating them altogether during Lent. To give your soul and your heart a break. To give yourself some newfound space and time for the fasting, prayer, and almsgiving that are the pillars of Lent and the key to growing in holiness and bearing good fruit.

Taking a break from media will also give you the freedom to discern which ones are sowing good seeds in you, and which ones are sowing rotten seeds. Then, on Easter Sunday, have the freedom and clarity of mind and heart to reintroduce the good ones back into your life.

+++

For the past 42 days I've been taking part in a program called Exodus 90. "It's a 90-day period of prayer and asceticism, supported by a fraternity of like-minded men."⁶ I'm in a group with six other priest friends, and there's also a group of eight young men in our parish who are doing this together. We'll be continuing our Exodus throughout Lent, until Easter Sunday.

Part of the asceticism of Exodus 90 is to do this very thing. To eliminate movies, television, websites, and music. I admit that part of me does miss watching shows, surfing the internet, and listening to the radio – in moderation, these can be legitimate forms of recreation. But I also have to say that, I don't *really* miss them all that much. Life is just fine for me without them. Maybe even easier and simpler.

I encourage you to consider something like this for your Lenten practice. And also, consider getting an accountability partner or group of friends to help you on your Lenten journey. Someone whom you can check in with and offer support to one another. Because it's not easy to make our Lenten journey on our own.

+++

Whether we've been making progress and growing in holiness and virtue over the past year. Or not making much progress. Or feel like we've been going in the wrong direction lately. Or maybe have been too busy, stressed out, worn out, depressed, or sick to even be trying to grow in holiness and bearing more good fruit anymore.

Whatever it is we're going through right now. Every year, Ash Wednesday comes around as a *gift*. And we see all kinds of people who respond to that gift. Like my former boss said, we all come to church on Ash Wednesday to get something. Yes, we do get ashes. But we get so much more than that. We get the chance to cut out the rotten fruit that might have built up over the past year. To start sowing more seeds of good fruit.

We get the chance to start something new with God. And our response – the way we all show up on Ash Wednesday – *reveals* what's deep inside all of us: a desire for Goodness; for Love; for communion with God.⁷

¹ Just as: "When a sieve is shaken, the husks appear (Sirach 27:4)."

² Sirach 27:4

³ Sirach 27:6

⁴ Luke 6:43-44

⁵ Jean Vanier, "To become holy" in *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, 296.

⁶ From exodus90.com

⁷ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 27*:

"The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for:

The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator (*Gaudium et Spes* 19§1)."