

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Sirach 27:4-7

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

1 Corinthians 15:54-58

Luke 6:39-45

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Sirach tells us that our speech discloses the bent of our minds, and that people should be praised only after they have proven themselves by their speech. And whatever the views of Henry Higgins, it's clear that it's *what* we say, and not how we say it, that matters. Good people, our Gospel teaches, produce goodness from the good in their hearts, and evil people produce evil out of their store of evil. Each person speaks from the fullness of the heart. So clearly, we will be judged on the basis of what we say.

I didn't need the scriptures to teach me this. I learned it when I was thirteen years old, in Mrs. Casper's Algebra class. I could never seem to catch on to Algebra -- probably because I was terrified of Mrs. Casper. She used to hold me up to the class as an example of invincible ignorance. When I gave a wrong answer, she would ask me to stand up and explain myself. I would invariably begin by saying, "Well, I *thought* that. . . ." Just at that point she would always interrupt me, and complain in her southern accent, "Now Charlie, you *know* what happens when you think!" Try as I might, I never managed to come up with an adequate response to that remark.

When I was even younger, my mother would sometimes have occasion to ask, in a very special tone of voice, "*What* did you say?" or "Well, what do you have to *say* for yourself?" I remember being deeply impressed, on

these occasions, by how much depended on the next words to come out of my mouth. Even while frantically trying to formulate the perfect response, I was struck by how important a few words were going to be to my immediate prospects.

So Scripture, on this occasion, confirms the lessons of experience. What we say matters. If anything, our readings emphasize that the things we say have implications for our *very* long term, as well as our short-term futures. The question then, is what do we say? What *do* we have to say for ourselves?

The warning about dwelling on the speck in someone else's eye, while ignoring the plank in our own, brings home the danger of hypocrisy. So we ought to go light on 'constructive' criticism -- particularly when the person we are trying to re-construct doesn't happen to be present.

We would do better to expend our energy and ingenuity speaking kindly of people. I'm not talking about blanket approval. As much as people enjoy flattery, they soon tire of being commended for what they know isn't particularly praiseworthy. I mean that we should develop our ability to recognize virtue when we see it -- to notice when someone has done well -- and to tell them, and others, of our appreciation.

To adopt this habit has social as well as moral implications. For one thing, an act of kindness, or a better than average performance, is more likely to be repeated if its recognized. On the down side, gossips eager to have the dirt dished to them about mutual acquaintances, are likely to find you dull company. But overall, you're likely to *grow* in popularity, for if you speak well of people in their absence, those you are *with* will feel confident that you speak kindly of *them* when *they* aren't around.

I once heard it said of a particularly kind man, that he cast a long

shadow. This is apparently a Jungian term. It means that he spoke so well of other people, that he stimulated a perverse desire in his listeners to tear those same people down, to restore the balance. I suppose that might be a danger for a very few of us. But most of us could afford to have a substantially longer shadow. And for some of us it always seems to be high noon.

When we are steadfast and persevering in thinking well, and speaking well, of others, we are fully engaged in the work of the Lord. And we know that our toil is not in vain when it is done in the Lord.