

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan,
Church of St. Thomas More NYC
March 3, 2019 8th Sunday of year C Luke 6:39-45**

Last year a survey was taken asking people what they thought about the idea of their son or daughter marrying someone of the opposite political party. When this question was asked in 1958, about 30% of the respondents said they wanted their child to marry a member of the same political party as themselves. When asked last year, over 60% of the respondents said they wanted their child to marry someone of the same party—almost equal for Democrats and Republicans. This only reflects the increasing tribalization of American politics, even of American life, wherein people want to be surrounded by people just like themselves. It is a variation on an old theme. What used to be called a “mixed-marriage,” either of race or religion, now extends to the realm of politics. I remember growing up in the Bronx, many years ago, a “mixed-marriage” then was one between someone of Irish and the other of Italian ancestry. Fortunately we have come a long way in getting beyond so many of those ethnic and racial prejudices, but we seem to just substitute one bias for another. Perhaps, that is because some people always want an “Other,” someone to whom they can point, whom they can consider inferior to themselves.

Today’s Gospel would have us reflect on just that—the role that “passing judgment” plays in our lives. Today we hear Jesus say, “Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?” Why do we think we can understand another’s actions, motives, and thoughts, when most of the time we don’t even understand ourselves? We feel we can figure others out, when we can’t figure ourselves out. We imagine we have developed the ability to “read” people, to notice all their flaws, while somehow being oblivious of our own. We are fine-tuned in the observation of others, but not so well trained in self-observation. I may not be guilty of that which I am judging another, but I certainly have my own flaws as well. Who appointed me judge, jury and character executioner of another? And, do I ever know all the “stuff” another is dealing with? What would I be like if I had to carry that burden?

Then there is the case where there are some people that we may really dislike, not because they have done us any harm, but simply because of who they are. What might be the reason for that? Could it be that their behavior, maybe even their very presence, is a reminder of something about ourselves that we don’t like to look at or reflect upon. So, without even knowing it, they become walking reminders, even indictments, of those character flaws or personality traits, that we don’t want to admit as being part of who we are, as well.

Jesus goes on to say, "A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit....A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil." How does that apply? Too often there is a tendency to label different groups of people, especially those with whom we have had very little contact. We might attribute to them all sorts of bad behavior or malicious intent. Then, we write them off, and in extreme cases, even demonize them. The antidote for this poison in human relationships is simply getting to know them. It is seeing how they live, how they conduct themselves, how very much like ourselves these people are. It is, as Jesus says, by observing the good that they do, that this can only come from a good heart. It is contact, interaction, and not isolation, that breeds respect for those who have long been disrespected. This can be true of refugees, of immigrants, of Muslims, of the homeless, and countless others.

Increasingly American life is like people living on an archipelago, a series of disconnected islands (of discourse), wherein people speak only to themselves, or to people just like themselves, sharing their own backgrounds, goals, biases and prejudices. Over time walls of one sort or another are built, seemingly for protection, but in the end they only prevent us from being enriched by what the Other has to offer. Let us pray that we can bridge those distances learning to value and appreciate people for who and what they are.