

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time - February 27, 2022
Deacon Jim Olshefski

Trees

BY JOYCE KILMER

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.*

*A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;*

*A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;*

*A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;*

*Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.*

*Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

"...But only God can make a tree." I recalled this closing line from the short poem, "Trees," by the Catholic poet, Joyce Kilmer, while meditating over today's readings.

This poem, and today's readings, brought to mind another tree, an Autumn Purple Ash tree, that Mary and I planted in our front yard a number of years ago. As the name implies, the leaves of this tree turn a lovely, purple in the fall before dropping for the winter. We planted this tree when our children were young and watched it grow, along with our kids. It eventually towered to almost 50 feet in height. This tree was a perfect complement to our home and we relished the shade that it provided during the hot summer months.

One year, all of the tree's leaves dropped, inexplicably, almost overnight in the middle of the summer. We were distraught; having thought that the tree had died! We were just about ready to cut it down; however, we **prudently** decided to wait, to have **patience**. So we carefully fertilized the tree and mulched around it. Then, lo and behold, the tree rebounded the next year to its former beauty. Although we no longer live at that house, we make it a point to walk by that tree every fall to watch it in its purple majesty! And when we see that tree, we're reminded that we made the right, the prudent, decision; we're grateful that we were not hasty in cutting-down that tree.

Prudence before speaking or acting is also important when dealing with those around us. We can be fooled by first impressions and physical appearances, as we heard in our first reading from Sirach, when we were warned that physical appearances can be deceiving: "One's faults [appear] when one speaks." What really determines who we are comes from within. This includes the quality of our words, the wisdom and the goodness, when we speak. Therefore, Sirach counsels us to "praise no one before he speaks for it is then that people are tested." This thought is similarly expressed in a passage from the Book of Proverbs (17:28), but

Abraham Lincoln added a humorous twist when he advised, "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt."

Jesus, in today's Gospel, which is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Plain which has been featured for the last two Sundays, teaches us that the quality of our hearts determines the quality of our words and actions: "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; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks."

As Christians, if we live according to the Gospel, our words and actions, learned from the teachings of Jesus and guided by the Holy Spirit, will be fruitful; we will be "known by [our] own fruit." If we fail to live accordingly, then our words and actions are filled with...nothingness.

It's many-times easier for us to see the faults in others, without recognizing similar faults in ourselves. In today's Gospel, Jesus also cautions us to not hypocritically judge others. When he speaks about noticing "the splinter in your brother's eye," while we cannot "perceive the wooden beam in [our] own eye," he is challenging us to make an honest assessment of what is in our heart, before criticizing and judging others. He advises us to be humble and look inward; for in doing so, we can, as St. Paul told the Corinthians in today's second reading, "be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord [our] labor"...our words and actions"...are "not in vain."

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we begin Lent, a period of repentance and preparation, through prayer, fasting and alms-giving, for the holy days leading up to the joy of Christ's resurrection on Easter. The lessons from today's readings give us an opportunity to begin our Lenten preparations a few days early through our practice of:

- Prudence in words and actions, and
- Introspective contemplation of our own conduct, thoughts, desires and emotions.

Have a holy, blessed and fruitful Lent!