

**Monsignor Dennis Sheehan**  
**Homily Given on February 25, 2001**  
**8th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Liturgical Year C**

When first I looked at this Gospel, I was tempted to cry: Slow down, Jesus! You're all over the lot! First you tell us about the folly of the blinded guides. Then you're on to wooden logs in my eye. Finally, you bury us in a heap of agricultural images: rotten trees, figs, grapes and brambles. How's a poor preacher to find one message for a gathering today and point ahead to Lent as well?

After a bit of pondering, I confess I decided to take the easy way out. Let's look together at only one of Jesus' multiple sayings today, namely, the one on the wooden beam in our own eye. I submit that by starting there, maybe the other sayings will make more sense. Then we might see more clearly how very appropriate this passage is for a Catholic hearer a few days away from Lent.

Recall where we are in Luke's Gospel. Today's reading has Jesus giving what commentators have come to call his "sermon on the plain". It began a few weeks ago with the Beatitudes. Last week, we heard about love for those who hate us. Today's passage is yet another part of the same sermon. Notice that this is not about doctrine, theology, or even Scriptural interpretation. Jesus, in the words we hear today, is talking very clearly about attitudes and behaviors. He's calling his disciples, then and now, not just to "talk the talk" but to "walk the walk". Nor is the behavior Jesus is calling for based on common sense. Quite the opposite. He asks for behavior in his disciples very out of the ordinary: loving enemies, forgiving injuries, lending with no hope of reward or even repayment. Very simply, Jesus is challenging all of us to behave like God, to see life and relationships not from human wisdom but from God's point of view.

Behaving in this unnatural, inhuman, superhuman way is no easy task. It requires a clear head. That brings us to today's passage. Jesus is talking quite simply here about self-knowledge and, specifically, self-criticism. What could be a more timely topic at the threshold of Lent than an invitation to look more closely, more clearly, more keenly at our own behavior as disciples? "Why do you notice", Jesus asks, "that there is a splinter in your sister's eye when you can't even see a log sticking out of your own?" The image is arresting, even a bit repulsive. But the image shows Jesus as a keen student of human nature. How often we decry the failings of others simply as a way of deflecting attention from ourselves!

The poet Robert Burns put the same message this way: "Would the gift the Good God gives us to see ourselves as others see us". Even our highway driving experience reinforces Jesus wisdom. Recall the bumper sticker you often see on an 18-wheeler: "Is my driving ok? Call us (and there's a number) with your comments. And thanks". This is not just a public image pitch. The company is risking a real response with the knowledge of the old saying: "The room for improvement is the biggest room in the world".

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates told us that self-knowledge (not self-esteem or self-worth) is the real beginning of wisdom. Few of us, it seems, are really wise in that way. We're so busy dealing with faults in our family and workplace, we leave little room for the most basic exercise of all: truly looking at ourselves.

Back in colonial America, New England churches had an unusual character in every congregation. He was called "the Pointer". When the preacher denounced a particular vice, it was the Pointer's task to call out the name of the parishioner guilty of the fault. Many of us would have loved that job. We would have been good at it too.

I've often asked myself why Jesus is so opposed to our judging others. I found a possible answer as I studied this passage. Jesus, after all, does not want disciples who do not have standards of moral conduct. But what Jesus is opposing is an attempt to improve others without a similar and prior attempt at improving ourselves! That's the whole point. A commentator wrote something of a lyric that sums up the wisdom of Jesus quite aptly, "There's so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us that it ill becomes any of us to find fault with the rest of us."

Hold your tongue, says Jesus today. Use your analytical powers first on yourself and you'll have little time for judging others. What an invitation to all of us just a few days short of Lent!

Jesus, knowing human nature, suggests we leave judgments about others to God. Often, our rush to judgment seems to think that God won't strike down the sinner fast enough. We seem trying to save God the trouble.

Lent begins Wednesday. In our Catholic tradition, Lent is not first about doctrine or theology. Lent is about discipleship-in-action, about life in the very real world as a confessing Catholic. Suppose I were to bridle my tongue this Lent. Suppose I was to hand out compliments instead of criticism. The point won't be lost on those around me. And who knows, it might even become a habit! Blessed Lent!