

We are here celebrating the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent, and this Gospel spears us through the gut and hoists us up to see the folly of our cultural bias and the blindness we have to our own faults. It causes an examination of not only our conscience but of our ego and the role it plays in our lives.

Jesus is still focused on the Apostles, and he is admonishing them in three different, but closely related parts of their, and our lives. Spiritual development (the blind man), humility and integrity of self (the beam), and the resulting actions (fruit of the tree).

"Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?" (*Lk 6:39*) When we look at the world around us with a critical eye and examine it in the light of the Gospel, we have to be equally amazed and dumbfounded at the sources, and the guidance we tend to follow as we live our lives in secular society. We seem to have forgotten the spiritual is what should guide our lives and that spiritual development is at least, if not more important than physical or mental development.

Spiritual development, spiritual growth is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. For spiritual development to be genuine we need guidance; we need a companion to help us on our way and to walk the journey with us. Spiritual development enables us to hear and understand the voice of God in the scripture, the magisterium of the Church and the events and experiences of our lives. Our paths of understanding may diverge as we grow within those broad left and right limits set by the Church, after all we are different people with different experiences. However, we can never presume to be greater than our guides, our teachers because if we do, our spiritual development will cease until we get back on course.

"Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?" (*Lk 6:41*) The most deadly of the seven deadly sins is pride. The cure for the sin of pride is the virtue on which all other virtues depend, humility. We live in a society that thrives on finding splinters without noticing the beam. Look at the news, the sniping between celebrities, people that have somehow been elevated to show us how we should live. And why would anyone post or pay attention to anything on Twitter? Everyone seems to be focused on finding fault with the other guy instead of trying to cooperate and lift society up as a whole.

We can become so full of pride that we can't imagine admitting that the other side may have a point, that we could be wrong, or heaven forbid, actually apologizing for something we did that may have hurt another person.

In order to combat this we have to become critical of our own behavior, not to the point of scrupulousness, but by looking at what we did during the day in light of the information we had at the time. We need to admit to our sins and learn from what we got right and what we did wrong. And when we were wrong, when possible we need to make it right. When appropriate, we need to apologize and whenever possible, that apology needs to be done in person, face to face, and toes to toes. After all, isn't that an essential part of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the face to face meeting with the Priest in the person of Christ to apologize for our offenses, our sins to the one whom we have offended?

The reason that Reconciliation can be so difficult is because the exercise of humility demands integrity of self. We can't just see ourselves the way we want to see ourselves. We can't see ourselves in the light of the praise or insults that others give to us. We have to try to see ourselves, to lay bare our souls and look at ourselves for better or for worse in that stark reality as God looks at us. Most of us, and I'm in that number, may never learn to see ourselves, to develop that level of integrity of self, but there is grace in acknowledging the requirement and in trying.

"A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. (*Lk 6:43*) The fruit of the tree, which is what we produce as a person is demonstrated in our behavior. None of us were created to bear bad fruit, but we do. All of us have some rotten branches that need to be pruned on our personal tree.

Our behavior is tied to our sense of identity. How many of us know someone who bought a Harley and six months later had grown a beard and would only wear jeans, tee shirts and a leather vest? Stereotypical case, but it makes the point. We usually behave in a manner consistent with our self image. If we see ourselves as generous people, we tend to act generously. If we see ourselves as being hard nosed and pragmatic, then that is how we act.

Moral change is dependent on changing our self image, on modifying our sense of identity. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us; "...for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks" (*Lk 6:45*) From the fullness of the heart, our

actions speak as well. If we want to change the fruit we bear, we need to change how we act. Just stopping a negative action isn't sufficient because nature abhors a vacuum. We stop the bad action and replace it with a corresponding good action.

For example, if we want to battle envy, we need to practice charity. If we want to battle gluttony, we need to practice abstinence. To fight lust, practice chastity, to tamp down wrath, practice patience. To get a handle on greed, practice temperance, to get ourselves off the sofa and easy chair into the fight against sloth, practice diligence and of course in order to recognize these issues within ourselves, we need to put pride in its place by practicing humility.

The replacement actions don't have to be huge, life changing alterations right out the door. No one goes into the gym on their first day to start off by knocking out 10 reps on the bench at 300 lbs. They start by knocking out 10 reps at 30 lbs and work their way up to 300 lbs. The same principle works in our spiritual life. Venerable Arch Bishop Fulton J. Sheen used to practice abstinence by giving up 3 things a day. An extra cookie for desert, a second cup of coffee, maybe skip a television show or give up some sleep to say another rosary. Nothing big in and of themselves, but across the course of his life time this and many other small practices like spending an hour a day in front of the Eucharist had a huge impact his life and the life of the Church.

Although I addressed spiritual development, humility and integrity of self and action as three separate topics, it should be obvious that all three are inextricably intertwined in the ordinary events of our daily lives. Now we are faced with the challenge of moving this subject matter from the Gospel through what I hope you found to be a fairly interesting homily into application in our daily lives.

This last Thursday in the Men's Spirituality Group we were discussing spiritual exercises for Lent and the idea of virtues vice deadly sins came up and was accepted as the topic for our meetings during Lent. But I'd like to recommend something to take it a bit further and recommend an exercise that involves the entire family.

As a young man Benjamin Franklin set out on a course of self improvement that he followed for his entire life. He picked several areas for self improvement and would concentrate on improving in one each week in rotation. Shamelessly borrowing from old Ben, I'd like to recommend that

during the weeks of Lent, each person or family pick a virtue to concentrate on improving each day. For example on Monday concentrate improving in humility. On Tuesday, while maintaining the improvement in humility, concentrate on improving in Charity and continue through the week and all seven virtues. Then on the following Monday, pick up Humility again while trying to hold on to the improvement in the other six virtues. Continue through the five weeks Lent and beyond if you like.

May God Bless each and every one of you as you put the Gospel into practice in the everyday actions of your extraordinary ordinary lives.