

# 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

27 February, 2022

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** Ecclesiasticus 27:4–7

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 92:2–3,13–14,15–16

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** 1 Corinthians 15:54–58

**Gospel** Luke 6:39–45

How do I know that you are a person? I have thoughts, feelings, desires, and my experience tells me these are essential to who I am. I can, to some extent, look inside my head and examine these thoughts, feelings, and desires: try to figure out why I do things and predict how I might act in potential situations. When I look at any of you, however, I cannot observe any of these things. All I see are your actions, what you do. But machines can do things too, so how do I know that you are a person like me, and the coffee maker isn't?

Truth is, I can't *know*, not really, but it is something I *believe*. I believe that you are a person, that you have thoughts, feelings, and desires similar to mine. You are not me, your circumstances are different from mine, and so I'll allow that your thoughts, feelings, and desires will not be identical to mine, but I can use my knowledge of my thoughts, feelings, and desires to extrapolate as to what your's might be and therefore come to understand you in a way that is similar to the way I understand myself.

Psychologists call this phenomena the "Theory of the Mind." While we may not be able to write it down in a formal fashion, each of us has a working theory of what constitutes a mind, a person like ourselves, and how to attribute those unobservable thoughts, feelings, and desires to something, someone, in possession of such a mind.

Common this phenomena might be, but like anything else human, it is far from perfect. Because I can observe my thoughts, feelings, and desires, they are immediately evident to me whenever I analyze my actions. I know I was angry when I said that hurtful thing and that I didn't really mean it. I know I was hungry, starving even, when I took your candy bar and that I fully intend to buy you a replacement when I can get to the convenience store. I know I was in a hurry to get somewhere when you asked me that question that I didn't have an immediate answer for. I understand my actions through the lens of the thoughts, feelings, and desires that I immediately experienced in that moment and which are intrinsically linked to the action in my memory.

When I look at you, however, what I see first are your actions. I know that you made a thoughtless comment. I know you took my candy bar without asking. I know that I had an important question to ask you, and that you brushed it off. Since I cannot see your thoughts, feelings, and desires the way I can see mine, I must construct them, try to figure out the "why" behind your

actions and my own feelings in these situations colors this process. Because I was hurt when you said something thoughtless, I see you as someone who wants to hurt people, as a mean person. Because I was frustrated when I couldn't find my candy bar that you took without asking, you're selfish with no thoughts for the property of others. Because you brushed me off and left me confused, you're a snob who thinks they are more important than me.

This double standard, what psychologists call the "fundamental attribution error," is the hinge point around which today's Gospel revolves. I see the splinter in your eye, the hypocrisy in your behavior, because I have attributed motivations to you based on my feelings in the situation. I do not, cannot, account for your thoughts, feelings, and desires in a completely accurate way because I cannot observe them. As a result I am unaware of all the circumstances that influence what you do and judge you not dispassionately, but according to my assumptions and reactions, which can be overly simple and unjustified.

By contrast, because I know my own thoughts, feelings, and desires, and because these are so intrinsically linked to the way I experience the world, I judge myself not based on what I did, but based on what I meant. It's not that I fail to see the beam in my own eye, to see the hypocrisy in my actions, but rather that I distort it, minimize it, make it out to be less than what it was. I am not the kind of person who does those things on purpose. I am not the kind of person who does those things regularly. They are, therefore, mistakes, accidents, mere slip-ups and not significant character faults.

Jesus, however, will have none of this. He knows we rationalize and minimize the things we do wrong; that we distort the beam and think of it as a mere speck, something so much smaller than the splinter in our neighbor's eye. But he demands the truth. He calls the beam what it is, a beam, and requires of us that we remove it from our eye. We must examine ourselves truthfully, find our own faults, and fix them. It is in struggling with our own faults that we learn just how much our actions are the result of our thoughts, feelings, and desires rather than a deliberate choice. It is through this struggle that we gain insight into how little control we have over our own thoughts, feelings, and desires. It is by this struggle that we gain the humility necessary to attribute the same struggle to others, to see their mind as more like ours than we were at first willing to admit. Only after this struggle, after the beam has been removed and we can see clearly, will we be equipped with the tools needed to help others in their struggles, the humility to bear their cross according to their needs and not our own.