

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT 1999  
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I suspect if you gave former vice president Dan Quayle a spelling test he would perform very, very well. But because of one widely televised mistake with the word "potato" the nation will scorn him for the rest of his life. It would be very hard to convince people that Dan Quayle can spell. No matter how much evidence he could bring forth, people have their minds made up about the issue and it's not going to change.

The Pharisees in today's gospel have their minds made up about Jesus. They say he is a sinner; he cannot come from God because he broke the sabbath. Never mind that he broke it by performing a miracle; never mind that he broke it to do charity for a man blind from birth; never mind that people believed he was the Son of God. No amount of evidence would ever convince them otherwise.

There is a type of sin that we don't hear much about. It's called social sin. It's a collective blindness. It rears its head in many ways. This week someone told me a story about an acquaintance of hers who was jumped by two black men. I wondered out loud why was it significant to the story that they were black? Was the crime more hideous because they were black? Or in her mind was "black men" a category of people who typically behave violently? On several occasions here at the parish white parishioners have warned me they saw strangers on the property; when I looked, the strangers were black. We have plenty of white strangers on the property every day, but no one is conditioned to sound the alarm when it happens. Racism is a social sin; it's a sin we all contribute to and a sin we all suffer from.

We also have prejudices against the disabled. Just look at how people treat the handicapped parking spaces in our lot. The able-bodied will park there if they just have to run in for a few minutes, or they'll squeeze between two other cars into a striped space meant to be kept clear. We doubt that the disabled really need the treatment they get. Our indifference is a product of social sin.

Consider how we let finances govern our moral decisions. Many engaged couples have told me they decided to live together because it saves money, as if being thrifty is the greatest moral value. I've heard people say they'll support a charity as soon as they can afford it, as if creating debt is part of our national responsibility and paying it off comes first. No, charity is part of the gospel; we cannot afford not to give to charity.

No matter what the problems in our society -- a black man dragged behind a truck in Jasper, Texas; inaccessible public buildings; no philanthropists as popular as sports figures; politicians reduced to cartoon characters -- we are part of a social sin that affects everybody; we contribute to it and we are formed by it.

St. Paul tells the Ephesians that through baptism they have become light in the Lord. Now they must live as children of light, bringing that light wherever there is darkness. "Sleeper, awake!" he says. Let us be alert to what influences our attitudes and behaviors, and bring light wherever people are collectively blind.