

**Tribalism and Wars** Twenty-third Week in Ordinary Time Friday, September 11, 2015  
8:15 AM 1Tm 1:1-2, 12-14; **Lk 6:30-42** (The Spirit desires to raise us up beyond our ethnic identities and our personal identities.)

**“Remove the wooden beam from your own eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother’s eye.”**

Jesus made it very clear that his whole program, if we want to call his teaching a program, **his program was about self-improvement, not the improving of other people.** This is very hard for people to get down. It seems that many people have this mission in life to improve other people or societies. Jesus’ point is we have to work on ourselves, each on himself or herself. It is not something we can do for somebody else. This of course is something parents often learn the hard way by trying to straighten out their wayward children. After a while they realize, well, they can’t. Their **wayward children will have to straighten themselves out**, and so it is.

Now in the terminology of our faith tradition or our faith understanding, there are these two words: Spirit and flesh. St. Paul says the Spirit wars on the flesh. No, he doesn’t; people think he says that. The Spirit never wars on anything actually. But he does say, “The flesh wars on the Spirit.” **It is the flesh that is the source of all waring and all hostility.**

**Now what is meant by the flesh?** You could say human nature or the physical, psychological makeup of people that has not been touched by the Holy Spirit. You could call that the flesh, or you could say **people in their natural state**; that’s the flesh. **And flesh works its way out in two different ways.** One is to be centered on self; that’s the Western way: **individualism, self-centeredness.** But the other way, more primitive but common in the past, is to be **tribal centric; some call it ethnocentric.** It means that the tribe or the group identified with, that is what is basic, and that’s all I care about. That’s of course where wars come from. **Individuals actually don’t make wars, but groups do. And it’s tribalism that’s the basis of all warfare.**

Now I said the Western way is individualism, that’s true, but we haven’t lost totally tribalism, that it reemerges in the Western world through nationalism and other forms of

ethnic identity. And this is what is at the root cause of what happened on **9/11 in 2001**. It is this identifying with a group. In modern commentaries this is often the fault of religion, but religion is really not the essence of all this. **Religion might be used by ethnocentric tribalistic groups to justify themselves. But the divisions don't come from religion.** Just look at Islam today, where you have Shi'ism versus Sunnism. Sufism is another movement, but it's actually very peaceful. Then there are others, the **Alawites of Syria** for example. That's a different group first and foremost ethnically. **Then because they are different ethnically, they start to tinker with the beliefs or the practices of Islam and become different.** And they are the ones who control the government of Syria against the other groups, but it's all tribal. And unfortunately that is **the raw condition of humanity**. That's the original condition of humanity, if you want to call it the original sin of humanity, the natural state of humanity. It isn't peace-loving. It's identified with a group, and that does not lead to peace; **it leads to conflict.**

So we pray today that we will rise above all this. The Spirit can. **The Spirit desires to raise us up beyond our ethnic identities and our personal identities.** St. Paul says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." That's a way of talking about conversion to Christ. We could also say it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us, so that **this new identity with God becomes something that is real both for individuals and for groups.** And this is what the **Church** is meant to witness to. We are supposed to be a group of people who do not identify with any sort of narrow ethnic division, identification, language, race, color, or anything else. It is supposed to be Christ who lives in us, and Christ is God, **God living in us reconciling the world to himself.** That is our mission as Church. So we have to remind ourselves from time to time what it is we are up against. It is the flesh warring on the Spirit. **The Spirit never wars on anything,** even though many people in their very poor theology think exactly that.