



A glazed painted tile illustrates Jesus' parable of the splinter and the beam, from the Netherlands, 1750-1850. (Wikimedia Commons/Museum Rotterdam)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Lent arrived late this year. In a happy coincidence — dare one suggest Providence had a hand in it — we all got to hear the Gospel reading for the [Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) three days before Ash Wednesday and it was a perfect match for a good Lent.

The passage from Luke's Sermon on the Plain contains three parables, of which the most relevant is this:

"Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye,  
but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?  
How can you say to your brother,  
'Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,'  
when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye?  
You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first;  
then you will see clearly  
to remove the splinter in your brother's eye."

During Lent, we are invited to consider the wooden beam in our own eyes.

This counsel is especially wise if we, as a church, are going to help our society overcome the intense polarization that afflicts it. It is so easy to list the many faults and failures of those whose politics are not like our own. Why don't they see things the way we see them!

Let us consider Catholics who refuse to vote for someone who is pro-choice on abortion. I do not agree with them, but the people I know for whom the issue of abortion is determinative are not crazy. They are not evil. They believe that if a politician is wrong about an issue as foundational as denying legal protection to innocent human life, they can't imagine how that politician could be correct about anything else, that the politicians' lack of a coherent moral vision is too great to earn their vote.

I know many pro-choice politicians who have a robust moral vision, even if their failure to grasp the moral issues at stake in abortion policy is problematic and deeply so. I do not know a pro-choice politician who has ever made an argument for their position that convinces me, but I do not conclude that their blindness on this

one issue is any greater or lesser than the blindness of someone who is pro-life on abortion but fails to see the moral urgency of combating climate change.

People's political views are shaped by a variety of things. People have different life experiences that shape their politics. People have different groups of friends whose views influence them. People draw on different sources for their values.

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People apply their values to the circumstances of our times differently: Some people lean into the view of politics as "the art of the possible" and allow great latitude in the application of their ideals to practical decision-making, while others think that tailoring moral principles to specific circumstances inevitably waters down those principles, and adopt a more rigid posture.

History instructs us that there are times when rigidity is called for, and times when it is a curse. Last week, I watched the 1961 movie "[Judgment at Nuremberg](#)" with Spencer Tracy, Marlene Dietrich, Burt Lancaster and Maximilian Schell. The movie considered the trial of four judges who served under the Nazis. If any moral issue is crystal clear, it is that the Nazis were bad.

Yet the movie did an amazing job examining the complex issue of the complicity of judges sworn to apply the law, not make it, at a time when the lawgiver deranged the law itself. In the end, even the tribunal of three judges could not reach a unanimous verdict.

As Catholics, we have a special obligation to try to build a better kind of politics. My problem with the culture warriors is not that they care deeply about certain neuralgic issues, but that they adopt a stance of prophetic denunciation too easily.

Professor Cathleen Kaveny of Boston College said, "A culture war approach is counter-productive. No one changes their mind when a bishop treats them with prophetic contempt." Kaveny literally wrote the book on the subject, publishing *Prophecy Without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square*, reviewed [here](#) and [here](#), in 2016.

Liberals read Kaveny's indictment of "prophetic contempt" and probably think of the effort to deny Joe Biden [Communion](#). Conservatives think of Episcopalian Bishop

Mariann Budde's [sermon](#) the day after President Donald Trump's inaugural address. Perhaps this Lent, all of us could give up prophetic contempt as well as chocolate.

Politicians and leaders in business, culture, labor and religion, all who exercise responsibility, must be held responsible. Different standards of judgment apply to their deeds than to the opinions of their supporters or the proverbial man on the street. With the former, the highest standards of probity and decency should be required. For the latter, generosity of spirit is what Luke calls us to. The only nonpolitician we should scrutinize as harshly as we do the politicians is ourselves.

A happy, forgiving, gentle, self-searching Lent to one and all.

This story appears in the **Lent 2025** feature series. [View the full series.](#)