

Ash Wednesday – 2018

In my Lenten letter to parishioners, I shared the story of a patient – well into her 90s – who proceeded to the Admissions Desk of her local hospital, to fill out the necessary forms to be admitted.

“Has your diet changed?” asked the receptionist. The patient gave her a stern look and replied: “Yes! For Lent I gave up whipped cream on my jell-o, hard candy, and my two beers at night.” Then, following a pause, she said: “...and look where it’s gotten me!!”

Well, here we are, beginning our annual Lenten Journey – modeling Jesus’ 40-day retreat in the desert – As we prepare for the celebration of our high holy days of Holy Week and Easter. There is an opportunity before us today: As disciples of Jesus, are we going to take advantage of our 40 day retreat or will it be business as usual ... with good intentions ... but no action...?

Well! We are off to a good start – we’re here today!

The first action step is to look into our hearts and get in touch with the stuff that isn’t working ... that isn’t helping me ... what we call sin. What is the stuff that hurts me, that prevents me from becoming more the person that God intends me to be? And, the stuff that hurts others ... my brothers and sisters?

Years ago as an incentive to get in touch with our sins – we were instilled with fear – fear of going to Hell! In the last 50 years, since the Second Vatican Council, we’ve learned to let go of that fear; we’ve come to understand that God loves us unconditionally – forgiving us over and over. Today, fear is not the primary motivation of our Lenten journey.

But: sin is a reality – that hurts and diminishes us and others and, ultimately, our world – greed, jealousy, lying, resentment, stealing, addictions ... gossip, hatred... violence; hurting one another in our families, taking advantage of others for mere pleasure or gain...

We seek to get in touch with our sin – not because we’re afraid to go to hell sometime in the future – but because sin causes us to live in hell right here and now!

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The second step – once we get in touch with our sin – is that we must repent from the sin:

Repentance – according to the Spiritual Giants – is more than saying we’re sorry, or feeling guilty. The Biblical meaning of repentance is far more challenging: beyond expressing sorrow and admitting guilt, repentance is turning completely around and going in a whole new direction...

Repentance in Scripture means to stop; make a radical turn around and take an entirely new path. Repentance means a change of mind and heart – demonstrated in transformed behavior. Repentance means we now have think, act and live differently than we did before when we were still “in” sin.

Instead of tearing another down and spreading gossip... pray for that person.

An alcoholic or drug addict, might be very sorry for consequences of drinking... but must stop drinking – join AA – get a sponsor – get into a treatment center...

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A third point of reflection: true repentance is impossible without the grace of God.... The 40 days of Lent can be SO powerful: 40 days of “letting go and letting God...”

Repentance leads to what in the New Testament is called “*metanoia*” – transformation – conversion; we are reborn becoming a bit more the persons God created us to be. We celebrate the Paschal Mystery: as we die to sin on Good Friday and are reborn – Resurrected – as new persons on Easter...!

The Spiritual Giants tell us that our Lenten discipline – fasting (from food, TV, electronics... whatever); abstaining from meat; spiritual exercise (reading, daily mass) etc. serve as means to get in touch with our hearts.

And, finally beyond confronting personal sin, Lent is a time to confront Social sin: the evil systems and structures and ways of life that are the root of injustice:

As a Parish we are confronting racism – white privilege and supremacy. Our commitment is to study... learn and break through our blindness and false beliefs ... seeking the truth that sets us free and to take up the work on behalf of justice that is central to the Gospel.

Let us pray for one another – as we receive the ashes:

“Repent! Turn away from your sin and be faithful to the Gospel!”

Amen!