

Sermon for Ash Wednesday Year C

[RCL] Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Becoming a Place of Resurrection

Jesus warns us to practice our piety in secret. We are not to give alms, to pray, or to fast in a way that plays to an audience of other people. Instead, we are to do these things in secret. And in each case a blessing is attached to this secret practice. As Jesus tells it, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Hearing these words now, on this opening day of Lent, means that whatever we do by way of Lenten practices is not done for a human audience, whether others or ourselves. The significance of these practices appears at a different level, that place where we encounter God. This is a hidden place, concealed certainly from others, and in a real sense, a secret even from ourselves. God meets us in our depths, in places that remain beyond our conscious sight.

Yet still it is easy for us to look on our Lenten practices as an area where we can earn rewards, the frequent flyer miles of the spiritual life. If we do well at keeping our Lenten practices then God is pleased with us that much more. If we do not do well, if we make scramble of Lent, then God, who sees in secret, is that much less pleased with us.

It's easy to regard our Lenten practices in this way. Perhaps it is unavoidable, but to do so is to miss the point. What God sees in secret is something more than our accomplishment.

Almsgiving, prayer, fasting – these are classic practices of Lent. There are others as well. But all of them, I have come to believe, lead us to the same place. For the sake of simplicity, let's consider only how almsgiving, prayer, and fasting take us there.

So you give alms to help people in distress. Perhaps you donate to our local food pantry to assist suffering people in your community. Perhaps you write a check to Food for the Poor or Episcopal Relief and Development. Maybe your almsgiving is expressed in action. You visit the sick, the lonely, people in prison. The giving of alms can take these forms and many more. However it's done, almsgiving brings us much closer than usual to the raw edge of human need.

What happens when we go there? We find out that human suffering is not a problem to be solved like an arithmetic exercise on a blackboard. Instead, we give alms and we find ourselves keeping company, directly or indirectly, with people whose suffering we would rather not have to consider. We lose our innocence about the state of the world; we trade satisfaction for solidarity.

Somebody else is fed or housed or comforted, but we are transformed. That's the real cost of almsgiving for us. Not only do we empty out a little of our treasure, but we are made a bit more compassionate, perhaps against our better judgment.

This is how God, who sees in secret, rewards us. We would have settled, say, for a framed certificate of appreciation and instead God changes our lives.

So you pray more than usual during the forty days of Lent. Perhaps you sit in silence before God for a specified period of time, you attend a weekday service, or you say a certain prayer once a day. Keep this up and in time you may make a discovery, it may be thrust upon you, that our prayer is something poor, dust and ashes, before the majestic reality of God.

The devotional practices we engage in may be eloquent, orthodox, time-tested, and even enjoyable. But the doing of them is full of distraction, characterized by uncertainty, an exercise in always starting over.

People of prayer are likely to have experiences like what Mary Lou Kownacki describes for us when she says:

"On my morning walk
My fingers move mindfully
Over the wooden beads
In my pocket.
Jesus, have mercy.
Jesus, have mercy.

"Stopping on the street
To talk with a crazed woman
Who has twenty-two cats
I forget the beads
I forget the mantra.

"Once again,
I fail to follow
The prescribed meditation technique.
After forty years of practice
I still do not know
When I am really praying."

We pray, or think we do, and what we discover is the poverty of our prayer, the emptiness of our words, the shallowness of our silence. Yet through prayer we are made a little more capable of recognizing the generosity of God.

Once, we may have believed that prayer changes God, aligns God with our view of the world. In Lent, we find that through our prayer God changes us, lets us recognize ourselves for who we are. It is in this way that God, who sees in secret, rewards us.

Then there is fasting. Maybe it's a meal regularly skipped or certain kinds of food abstained from. There are other fasts as well. People give up alcohol, television, book buying, or grumpiness as part of their Lenten observances. But all forms of fasting resemble abstinence

from that which feeds us. This traditional religious fasting is not done to make us trim, though it may do that; it is done to make us empty.

A food fast deserving of the name will leave us hungry. We will recognize our frailty, that our lives encompass not only the spiritual but also the biological. We are dependents of the food chain. We are based in our bodies. We cannot live on bread alone, that's true, but without bread, we cannot live at all.

The fleshly hunger that we feel as a result of such fasting reminds us of the spiritual hunger that we need to feel to be truly alive. Yet often this spiritual hunger is sated, concealed due to the ingestion of one form of junk food or another that lust for our allegiance.

Hunger for God is our healthy state, yet often our hearts are stuffed with what cannot nourish us. An empty stomach will give us hope that our hearts may become empty enough to receive the God who is our only satisfying food.

Through our fasting God changes us. We are reminded that we are constituted not by our achievements or even our failures, but by the need for God. Our hunger is not for bread alone, but for the holy.

The practices of Lent are good for us, but not if we see them as achievements. They are instead ways in which we become aware of our poverty and awake to the generosity of God. What we seek is not a successful Lent, a checklist of what we have done. What we seek instead is a holy Lent, an exposure of our emptiness, so that each of us can be a place of resurrection.

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