

Ash Wednesday Homily “Lenten Observance By Way of Gratitude”
Fr. Frank Schuster

There is a Jewish folktale Fr. Ron Rolheiser, theologian and spiritual master shares in his book *Against an Infinite Horizon*.

It begins...

“There once was a young man who aspired to great holiness. After some time at working to achieve it, he went to see his rabbi.

‘Rabbi,’ he announced, ‘I think I have achieved sanctity.’

‘Why do you think that?’ asked the rabbi.

‘Well,’ responded the young man, ‘I’ve been practicing virtue and discipline for some time now and I have grown proficient at them. From the time the sun rises until it sets, I take no food or water. All day long, I do all kinds of hard work for others and never expect to be thanked. If I have temptations of the flesh, I roll in the snow or in thorn bushes until they go away, and then at night, before bed, I practice the ancient monastic discipline and administer lashes to my bare back. I have disciplined myself so as to become holy.’

The rabbi was silent for a time. Then he took the young man by the arm and led him to a window and pointed to an old horse which was just being led away by its master.

‘I have been observing that horse for some time,’ the rabbi said, ‘and I’ve noticed that it doesn’t get fed or watered from morning to night. All day long it has to do work for people and it never gets thanked. I often see it rolling around in snow or in bushes, as horses are prone to do, and frequently I see it get whipped. But, I ask you: Is that a saint or a horse?’”

Fr. Rolheiser comments, “This is a good parable because it shows how simplistic it is to simply identify sanctity and virtue with self-renunciation and the capacity to do what is difficult. In popular thought there is a common spiritual equation: saint = horse; what is more difficult is always better. But that can be wrong. To be a saint is to be motivated by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less”

Let me underscore Fr. Rolheiser’s point here again, to be a saint is to be motivated by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less.

Jesus warns his disciples to pay attention to our attitudes and motivations when it comes to our Lenten observance.

Jesus says, “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.”

My friends, why do we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday? Why do we abstain from meat on Fridays? Why do we take on Lenten practices? We do these simple and yet profound rituals as a way to shake us out of our ordinary way of doing things, to take time and consider how grateful we are to God from whom the awesome gift of life comes, and to take time to intentionally care about others, especially the less fortunate.

My friends, every Ash Wednesday we are shaken out of the ordinary, to be conscious of the sanctity of the human lives around us, and to be a more grateful people, a people who do not take our life or the lives of others around us for granted.

During Lent, we are invited to pray, we are invited to fast, and we are invited to perform acts of personal penance to shake us into this new consciousness. Lent can be an opportunity to try to do our New Year's resolution again. This can be a time to spend five minutes or more in prayer each morning, perhaps with scripture or the rosary. Lent can be time to participate in operation rice bowl or helping out at Hope House. Lent can be a time to make the effort to attend some of our special devotions like the Stations of the Cross. There are as many ways to enter into Lent as there are baptized Christians.

My friends, we are invited to perform spiritual exercises, not because we are horses. We do these things because we are human. At times we mortals need to be shaken from the ordinary, to be reminded that our days are numbered, that "we are dust and to dust we will return". At times we need to be reminded to not waste the precious time we are given and to be very grateful for the gifts God has given us, especially the gift of life.

We have so precious little time to do our part for the building up the kingdom of God. Ash Wednesday reminds us of our mortality, that time is short, to shake us out of complacency and stop wasting time in the Spirit Life. We are invited to take up St. Francis' invitation to preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary, use words.