

Ash Wednesday “Lenten Practices”
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Ash Wednesday on Valentine’s Day. Bummer! I sincerely want to make good on my threat last weekend to make little “heart” marks on your foreheads this year. Of course, after one of the masses last weekend, I had one elderly person who had been married for a number of years tell me, I think his words were, “fasting and abstinence on Valentine’s day? Sounds about right!”

I can’t tell you how many times I have been asked, “Father, why does the Church ask that we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday? Why are we asked to abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent? What is the deal with practicing acts of penance? Doesn’t God just love us the way we are?”

“Doesn’t God just love us the way we are?” When I am asked this particular question, I love seeing people’s expression when I answer with an emphatic, “Well, no. Not always, God does not always love us the way we are”. Yes, God does love us unconditionally and he loves us always. But, God does not love our sinful behavior. God does not love it when we demonstrate addictions to anger, greed, gluttony, lust, pride, covetousness, or envy. God does not always love us the way we are, and if we are honest with ourselves, neither do we.

And this is a sobering reminder. It is the message we hear in our scripture readings today. The prophet Joel is talking to his whole nation. The message Joel gives them is that God does not always love them the way they are. Joel says, “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; rend your hearts, not your garments and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment.” The message is God loves us. But God does not always love what we are doing.

St. Paul implores the Corinthians in our second reading, “In Christ’s name: be reconciled with God. For our sakes God made him who did not know sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God. As your fellow workers we beg you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” Wow, that is quite the message isn’t it? St. Paul is in fact telling them that God loves them. Paul is also telling them the God does not love the way they are behaving at present.

And so, every year, the Church gives us the season of Lent. The word Lent is actually from the old English meaning “Spring-time”. It is that time every year we are called to do some spiritual Spring-cleaning, to help clean up those areas in our soul that have need of cleaning or repair. Fasting and other forms of penance during Lent, and throughout the year for that matter, are excellent ways to remind ourselves of what is really important in life. It is good to be reminded that there is more to life than satisfying our appetites. It can also be said that if we treat every day like a feast day, like many of us can be guilty at times of doing, feast days lose much of their meaning. It is good to balance our lives with a measure of fasting from time to time so we can better celebrate feast days when they come.

The ashes we will be receiving today are important. They remind us that we are dust and to dust we will return. And, even though I joked earlier about making little hearts with the ashes, I sincerely can't think of a more loving symbol than the cross. The cross is proof that God loves us. The ashes and the denial of earthly pleasures today also remind us that our lives ought to be focused more on things that really matter for eternity rather than on all the things we tend to fixate on that in the end turn to dust.

“OK Father, why fish?” The Church practice is actually to abstain from meat on Fridays and Ash Wednesday, if you wish to include fish in that category be my guest. On the other hand, we can consider that the fish was, and continues to be, a symbol for Christ. In Greek, the word for fish is Ichthus. Take each letter of that word and you get, Jesus Christ Son of God Savior. You see, Jesus died for our sins on a Friday. Eating fish on Fridays can help us call to mind Jesus' sacrifice for us. Fish on Friday can also call to mind the Eucharist, especially if we include in this practice a measure of fasting. All you can eat lobster misses the point. I know people who follow this practice year round, not just on the Fridays during Lent. In the spirit of fasting, we of course also have the practice of giving something up during Lent until Easter, or perhaps taking on something new that is personally healthy or good for the community. The desert is a place of purification and enlightenment and Lent is a time for us to grow in discipleship.

In addition to fasting, there are two other practices we also adopt during Lent. The first one is obvious. We must pray. We must pray daily. Our Lenten practices are meaningless without prayer, as is our claim to discipleship. During Lent, we pray more intensely for the grace of repentance and conversion. We examine our consciences more and ask for the forgiveness of our sins more, taking advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In addition to fasting and prayer, we also focus our attention more on the needs of the poor. Lent is a time to turn up the volume on our almsgiving. We will have Operation Rice bowl again this year that cares for the needs of people in areas of extreme poverty. We also have our St. Vincent de Paul and African orphans to support. These are worthy ministries to support year round, however, during Lent, the practice of giving alms opens our hearts in love and compassion to others in need.

Meanwhile, I invite us all to be mindful of the words of our Lord. When we fast, when we pray and when we give charitably, we are not make a show of it. On the other hand, we are, as St. Paul says, ambassadors of Christ. What Jesus is saying, it seems to me is, our prayer, fasting and almsgiving should come from a generous spirit, not a self-serving spirit. Otherwise, we miss the point.

My friends, we have entered into the forty days of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Our practices may seem odd to others. These practices, however, are spiritual exercises for the soul. They not only help us to become better disciples, they help us to become better human beings. During Lent we are a countercultural sign to the culture in which we live that God still loves this world. God loves us. There's the proof (the cross). The cross is proof that God loves this world. God's love doesn't stop there however. The cross also calls the world to conversion of heart because although Jesus loves us, he doesn't always love us just the way we are. Jesus calls us to conversion. Jesus calls us to love God and our neighbor so we may be blessed with his Easter joy! On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we do not have all the time in the world. It is good to be reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return.