

FAST, PRAY, LOVE
2020 Ash Wednesday Meditation
Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Friends in Christ, every year at the time of the Christian Passover we celebrate our redemption through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration and to renew our life in the paschal mystery. We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by **self-examination** and **penitence**,
by **prayer** and **fasting**, by **works of love**, and by **reading** and **meditating** on the Word of God.

("Invitation to the Observance of the Lenten Discipline," from the Book of Common Worship, emphases added)

Jesus reiterates for us in tonight's Gospel text that we perform before a divine audience of One. The ancient Greek word for an actor playing a role on the stage was the term "*hupokrites*," a hupokrites was one who dons a costume and puts on a performance before people. That's where we get the word "hypocrite" ... one who is play-acting a role before others. Three classic Lenten disciplines (*of the seven mentioned in the Invitation given at the outset of our worship*) are mentioned by Jesus in tonight's Gospel reading, disciplines Jesus underscores are best carried out before the divine audience of One, not "hupokritically" acted out to impress others. Prayer, Fasting, [Works of]Love. Actually, the order we have them in the passage is Works of Love, Prayer and Fasting. The meditation title "Pray, Fast, Love" is a bit of a play on my sermon title a few weeks ago, and that was a bit of a play on the title of the book Eat, Pray, Love (*a book I quoted from in that sermon but overall do not endorse, but I digress*). Those of us used to Lenten observances tend to think of "giving up" or "stop doing" something for Lent, however, instead of thinking what I might want to give up and/or stop doing for Lent, as most of you know I like to think of what I might GIVE or DO for Lent ... something proactive, something productive to honor our Lord Who gave and did so much for us! I think these particular disciplines mentioned here ... loving, praying, fasting ... are not so much about "giving up" or "stop doing" as they are about proactively *giving* or *doing*. Another quick little thing to note at the outset is that Jesus prefaces each one with "When" you do such and such ... *When you pray, when you give to the needy, when you fast* ... not "If". He is implying these are things that His disciples just DO.

The first discipline Jesus mentions is intentional, but hidden, acts of love and charity. This can certainly be done year round, but I would encourage all of us during these next forty days to engage in intentional, but "hidden" (*or anonymous, or secret, or covert*) acts of love and charity. Look for ways you can graciously give to someone in need in a way he/she will not know it is you doing the giving. Suggestions I've made in the past: Take the lousy parking space, leaving the empty space nearer to the church or the store for someone else. Put away the shopping carriages strewn all over the grocery store parking lot, left by some lazy, careless shopper that didn't take the little time or effort to simply put the thing away her/him self (*as you may have discerned, this is a pet peeve of mine! I know some can't do so for health reasons, but most can*). Pick up the litter on the ground, the sidewalk, the store aisle (*it always bugs me when people just obliviously step over something they could easily pick up and discard*). Clear the snow from someone's driveway (*if we ever get any snow this winter!*). Put money in an envelope and send it with no return address to someone you know who could use it (*something, by the way, that some angel did for me this past Christmas eve ... it was left in an envelope on my desk, a generous gift from an anonymous giver ... and it was indeed timely; thank you*). Be creative; use your imagination! I encourage all of us to determine to do at least one anonymous act of loving care, concern and/or charity each day; to do something each day to make someone's life easier, or as Jimmy Durante sang years ago, "*Make someone happy, Make just one someone happy*." And as Durante's old song ends, you'll find "*And you will be happy, too*." Be sure to keep it secret and anonymous, and you'll see how fun it can be! In our acts of love don't be like the hen cackling when she lays an egg, as if to proclaim to any who would hear, "*Hey, look what I did! Cluck, cluck, bwalk!*" Quiet down. You're a hen; you're supposed to do that! We are Christians; we are supposed to do loving things! And in doing so we will be imitating the God Who anonymously blesses us time and again throughout the course of our days. Jesus intimates God reserves a special reward for those who do such things knowing He is the only "audience."

The second discipline mentioned is prayer. Most of you know the traditional symbol for Lenten prayer is the pretzel. During Lent, early Christians made dough of flour, salt and water; they then shaped that dough in the form of two crossed arms, an ancient posture for prayer, to remind themselves to pray. Private prayer is conscious, deliberate time spent with God, which may or may not include actual spoken words. One side

benefit is that the more time we consciously place ourselves in God's presence, the more we begin to take on dimensions of God's character. We often unconsciously take on characteristics of those we spend time with, for better or worse! The Holy Presence can act like something of a divine Swiffer Dust magnet, just lifting the "dirt" out of our lives as we intentionally draw near to Him. I invite you to observe Lent with conscious and deliberate prayer at least once each day, spending deliberate time in God's presence. It need not be long; simply intentional. If this is new to you, use a book or prayers or a devotional booklet to help get you started.

Fasting is the third traditional Lenten discipline mentioned by Jesus. Of the three disciplines mentioned, this one seems most associated with "Giving Up," but it doesn't have to be; it can have a positive thrust with profound benefits. Fasting is an intentional way to proactively exercise control, *self* control, over basic appetites, which has the positive benefit of helping build self-discipline which better equips us to say "NO" in more difficult situations. I've read John Wesley so believed in fasting that he would not ordain anyone to the Methodist ministry unless they routinely fasted Wednesdays and Fridays ... I'm sure many Methodist pastors are glad this has been dropped from the requirements! But in fasting, whether it is abstaining from one particular food or from ALL food for a time, we exercise and develop our God-given ability to say "NO." And we become better equipped and conditioned for the more difficult battles of destructive temptation life will bring our way. Fasting has also been found to be physically as well as spiritually beneficial, as it cleanses the system, clears the mind, strengthens the will and refreshes the spirit. And it frees up our time! One thing that always impresses me during a period of fasting is realizing just how much I do is driven by consuming and satisfying appetites ... how much time is taken up with thinking about consuming, planning for consuming, shopping for consuming, preparing for consuming, recovering from consuming. And as those who have practiced fasting will affirm; after getting over the initial hurdle of resisting, say, the first two meals, it gets easier ... and many attest to a resulting rush of energy and clarity of mind and a fuller sense of spirituality. I know not everyone can fast, due to medical conditions and/bodily limitations. However, many of us who are able have just never tried; I encourage you to think about practicing this Lenten discipline in some form or another this season.

Jesus says in verse 16: *"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show they are fasting ... but when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face so that it won't be obvious that you are fasting."* In churches today, ashes are imposed and these words are spoken, *"From dust you have come and to dust you shall return."* Ashes are a symbol of dust; there is a bit of a play on words in the Hebrew vocabulary here: roughly transliterated, Dust is *Aphar*, and Ashes is *Ephar*. *(The phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." is much more poetic in Hebrew.)* I've gone back and forth on this over the years, trying to rectify the propriety of what is a public display of piety with what appears to Jesus' strong admonition against it. Jesus says to the faster, *"Wash your face!"*, and here we are in church on Ash Wednesday liturgically *dirtying* our faces. However, I'm now fine with this observance.

Jesus' words about piety in private are misinterpreted if they are used to suggest piety *must* not be public. Where else do we live out our piety but in public? If we are not publicly displaying our sincere piety then I would say something is wrong with our piety! I believe Jesus' point is simply one of motivation. In our fasting, loving and praying, are we "play acting" for the human audience around us, or are our actions truly borne of our love for God? And of course our love of God is played out on the stage of this world, but we are primarily performing for an audience of ONE. And it is OK to bear public witness to our faith through discreet and tasteful outward adornment, be it on our clothing, jewelry, or ashes on our foreheads ... symbols of our piety and submission to God. Anyway, as explained in the insert, there is an alternative option we've offered the past seven years. The imposition of ashes will be offered following the benediction. The ashes are traditionally composed of burned palm fronds from the previous Palm Sunday. Those who desire ashes may have them imposed on the traditional central location of the forehead, or you may elect the more discreet option of imposition to have the ashes placed on your hand of action, as a discretely hidden reminder to you that Lenten disciplines are proactive; they are as much about DOING as they are about sacrifice in grateful acknowledgement of what our Lord did and sacrificed for us. If you do choose to come forward, just indicate your preference by either holding out your hand or by standing with arms at your side.

The phrase *"From dust you have come and to dust you shall return"* goes all the way back to Genesis 3. There God reminds the man and the woman of one somber consequence of their sin: the fact that some day they will die, *"... to dust you shall return."* The Tempter promised them they would not die, but as we no know, he was a lying snake. Death is now part of life. Apart from the grace of God, at death you and I would return to the elements. But as we will celebrate at the end of this season on Easter, death is not the final end. After all, the ashes imposed as an outward symbol of our submission to God are not merely dirty smudges of dust and death. They also form the sign of the cross.