

Return to me with all your heart

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Fr. Patrick Raymond

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. - Joel 2:12-13

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way ... by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God ... - 2 Corinthians 5:20a, 6:4a,6a.

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." - Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

A man who hadn't paid his taxes for years became so anxious that he couldn't sleep. He would toss and turn, brooding on the huge debt and imagining getting caught. Finally, he withdrew some money from the bank and stuck it in an envelope with a letter: "*Dear IRS: Enclosed you will find \$500, part of the taxes I have failed to pay. If, after sending it, I am still unable to sleep, I may send you the rest of what I owe.*"

The story is contrived to make us laugh. But we might wince or cry instead, if we can it as a trailhead, a starting point for looking at our own mounting debts, and how we add up what we think we owe (and to whom), and how often we rationalize that some fractional payment will be enough. Viewed this way, the story of the man and his taxes may caution us as we begin to walk the path of Lent. *How much of a debt do I imagine that I've racked up with God over the past year? How much of it will I try to pay down in Lent? What self-justifications would I include or imply if I wrote a letter to God explaining my Lenten payment plan?*

Unsurprisingly, the man with the pile of debt who wrote to the IRS did not include his name. He reminds me how I would like to believe, and sometimes convince myself, that I can

deal with my sins anonymously: *Let me find a way out with a minimum payment that doesn't require me to ID myself to anyone.*

Whenever I go down this tempting, dead-end path, I am forgetting that the heart and essence of my faith is relationship – first and foremost a relationship with the one who created us in love, the one who says in Scripture, “*Before I created you in the womb, I knew you;*” (Jeremiah 1:5) the one who, in the words of Jesus, “*knows your every need before you even ask*” (Matthew 6:8). The God with whom we imagine we can bargain, during Lent or at any other time, is the one who knows us more intimately than we know ourselves, the one who, in fact, loves us more genuinely than we love ourselves.

This message reaches out to us from all of today's appointed Scriptures. We may cringe at God's threatening tone as conveyed by the prophet Joel. But did you also hear God's deep yearning for us: “*‘Yet even now,’ says the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart ... rend your hearts and not your garments.’*” (Joel 2:12-13) The epistle reading begins: “*We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*” (2 Corinthians 5:20b) And then we are shown the qualities that mark those who are so reconciled: “*purity ... patience ... holiness of spirit ... truthful speech.*”

In his teaching from the Sermon on the Mount in today's gospel, Jesus implores us to examine our motives where our religious practices are concerned. He takes particular aim at those he calls ‘hypocrites.’ The literal translation of the Greek word here is ‘stage actors,’ those who go through the motions as if they are merely playing a role that has no connection to, or consequences in, real life. ‘*Don't just go through the motions of righteousness,*’ Jesus is saying. ‘*Rather, seek to live and experience a purity of heart and a genuine holiness of life that makes and keeps a living dwelling place for God within you.*’

Three times Jesus illustrates how the ‘stage actors’ go through the motions of religion, and three times he shows us how the same religious practice looks in the life of those who are in fellowship with the One he calls ‘*your Father who sees in secret.*’ Jesus aims to lead us on a quest for that incomparable gift of intimacy with God in the inner sanctuaries of our own hearts.

In the quest that is mapped out here and throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also compels us to look at our motives, our appearances and our relationships, not only with God but also with one other and with ourselves. What if our Lenten path this year allowed us to finally address some long-broken relationship, perhaps rebuilding trust and reciprocity and even laughter? What if the result of any Lenten disciplines might be to better see ourselves or others, not as hopeless debtors but as the light of the world?

As we will hear in the Exhortation in a few moments, Lent does call us to ‘self-examination and repentance,’ (BCP, page 265) But we will have taken the wrong Lenten path if, at the end of it, we have added even more weight to the load of shame that we are already carrying. We will have taken the wrong path if, at the end, we are showing off what we imagine to be some greatly improved moral credit score. We will have taken the wrong path if we believed that we could ever pay off our debts to God. Jesus has already paid off those debts, all of them.

The right and life-giving path of Lent, to which all signs point and along which all of us are invited, has only one main destination. We will know we have taken it if, at the end, we arrive at renewed, debt-free and joyful relationships: with our God, with ourselves and with others.
Amen.