

As a pastor I yearn for every single member of this congregation to begin this Lenten journey toward Easter together on Ash Wednesday. But I know, as you all know, that there will be some who skip right to the end. To say it another way: do not be surprised if our attendance numbers are significantly higher on Easter than they are on Ash Wednesday. It is what it is.

Knowing that, however, makes it tempting for those of us here today to be just a little bit smug and proud. After all, if you are here today, you “get Lent.” You get this whole prayer and fasting and meditating on God’s holy Word thing, and you aren’t too afraid of the wilderness.

But we must be very careful with those feelings because if we are not careful with them, they can lead us down a very dangerous path. The great John Chrysostom, a fourth-century golden-tongued preacher, once preached an Easter sermon that is read to this day, especially among the Orthodox. I want to peak ahead to the end of this journey by reminding you what he said in that sermon:

If anyone has labored from the first hour, let them today receive the just reward.

If anyone has come at the third hour, with thanksgiving let them feast.

If anyone has arrived at the sixth hour, let them have no misgivings; for they shall suffer no loss.

If anyone has delayed until the ninth hour, let them draw near without hesitation.

If anyone has arrived even at the eleventh hour, let them not fear on account of tardiness.

For the Master is gracious and receives the last even as the first; he gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour, just as to him who has labored from the first.

He has mercy upon the last and cares for the first; to the one he gives, and to the other he is gracious.

He both honors the work and praises the intention.

Enter all of you, therefore, into the joy of our Lord, and, whether first or last, receive your reward.

O rich and poor, one with another, dance for joy!

O you ascetics and you negligent, celebrate the day!

You that have fasted and you that have disregarded the fast, rejoice today!

The table is rich-laden; feast royally, all of you!

The calf is fatted; let no one go forth hungry!

Let all partake of the feast of faith. Let all receive the riches of goodness.

What then, is the point, of taking Lent seriously if everybody still gets invited to the party at the end? What’s the point of Lent if God’s love is that indiscriminate? Why do the prayer and fasting and penitence if God is just going to be gracious and merciful to those who sneak in at the eleventh hour? Sin boldly and let grace abound, eh? Those are questions worth living with for a while, maybe even for

forty days or so. But let me at least point to two possible responses: one about the nature of God and one about the nature of human existence.

First of all, notice that even as the prophet Joel blows the trumpet and calls for a solemn fast, he reminds his listeners that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The psalmist reminds us that God forgives, heals, redeems, crowns; that God satisfies with good things and renews us like eagles. The psalmist, too, knows that God is full of compassion and mercy and slow to anger and of great kindness.” St. Paul reminds the Church in Corinth, and those of us assembled here today, that in and through Christ we are offered reconciliation with God, and empowered to become the righteousness of God—not someday but now. *Now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation.*

So if this Lent gives us a chance to remember that we cannot earn God’s grace and love, but that they are freely offered to us and to all, then this Lent will have been a “success.” Lent is not a means to an end. It is, rather, an opportunity to remember who God is and to recommit ourselves to deepening our relationship with that God revealed in Jesus Christ. To say this all more simply: making time to be with God in Lent is a privilege, not an obligation.

That leads to the second point, which is about us. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Soren Kierkegaard explored the notion of despair, which he saw as a part of human life. Whether they know it or not, Kierkegaard wrote, everyone is in despair. The most basic form of despair stems from not knowing you are in despair.

Kierkegaard is hardly light reading, and I suppose for many not a particularly happy read. But I guess it depends on whether you take the short view or the long view. Kierkegaard understood despair to be caused by the tension between the infinite and the finite. Because we humans are finite, we will all one day die. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

But that’s not the whole story. Yes, we are mortal, formed of the earth. But we also have been created in God’s own image. We live with this tension between the finite and the infinite. Or to put it another way, we carry a great treasure in earthen vessels. The resolution to this tension is to live with hope rather than despair. This is achieved, Kierkegaard said, only when we learn to put our whole trust in God.

It seems to me that this has everything to do with the journey into the wilderness upon which we embark today, a journey reminiscent of the forty years the Israelites spent in the Sinai Desert and of Jesus’ forty days and forty nights in the Judean wilderness. Lent is about learning to let go of false idols in order to rely on

God one day at a time. It is a place where we are given gifts: bread, water, Torah, neighbors. It is a place where we must face our own temptations and learn to grow from them.

We come to Lent not to judge anyone else, but to work on our own stuff, to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Too many of us carry around some baggage about Lent that tends to focus on duty and obligation at best and shame and guilt at worst. If you have some of that baggage, I invite you to let it go this Lent. Just let it go. Give *that* up this Lent!

The Hebrew and Greek words for “heart” are used 814 times in the Bible to refer to the human heart and 26 times to refer to the heart of God. Five of those uses come up in today’s readings, even as our opening collect today asked God for new and contrite hearts. A simple word study makes it clear that Ash Wednesday is a matter of the heart.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus reminds his disciples that prayer and fasting and almsgiving are not a means to the end of winning God’s heart. God is already crazy about us. Rather, we are called to prayer and fasting and almsgiving in order to soften up our own hearts in order to make sure that we keep them in close proximity to our treasure. Jesus doesn’t mince words. He says that our desire for wealth (and sometimes it’s a desire for security) draws us from the heart of God and into idolatry. He calls us back to the heart of God, which is “...full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.” He calls us back to the God who has already claimed us as his own and marked and sealed us in Holy Baptism.

The practices of Lent, in other words, are not necessary for us to win God’s heart. They are a chance for us to do those cardiac exercises that will keep our own hearts healthy.

The Easter invitations have already been sent out, and *everyone* is invited. No worries about that! But we have the opportunity, over the next forty days, to get ready by choosing to spend some quality time in the presence of God, by making room in our hearts, by reflecting and growing and deepening our faith. May we willingly, and joyfully, seize that opportunity.

Easter will be here before you know it!