

Render your hearts and return to God, says Joel. Be reconciled to God, says St. Paul. For the Lord is full of mercy and compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness.

Friends, We have arrived. On this Ash Wednesday, we now begin our season of Lent; a journey of forty days which calls us to look within, to acknowledge and reflect, to turn back to God with sincere repentance, and to then, with God's help, lean into the invitations of righteous life.

It is the time when Jesus beckons us out of our everyday slumber of living into a time of acute self-awareness and consciousness: so that we may ask ourselves: *Who am I and who have I been? What have I done or failed to do to the benefit of others and why? How might I draw nearer to God?* Jesus calls us to a serious examination of the intentions and desires of our hearts, so that we may become aware of where they align with God's purpose, and where they may have fallen off track.

We begin by engaging both our bodies and our spirits. In just a little while, after some time of prayer and reflection, our mortal and physical bodies will be marked with the sign of the cross, in ash, across our

foreheads — in the exact place where we are marked as Christ's Own in baptism; the place on our human body where life in Christ began, and the sign now marked upon us that points to where Christ's life will end, keeping us ever mindful that we too, will die.

But ashes aren't imposed solely to remind us of our mortality — they are a symbol that initiates us into Lent, into this season beckons us to become aware, to make changes, to more deeply commune with God. We know that the journey to New Life, the ultimate path to resurrection, must take us to and through the cross. It is impossible for us to find and claim this promised newness without traveling through the pain of acknowledging our own human brokenness. We seek God's forgiveness and guidance, and so, with intention, choose to lean into, to try on the sacred practices Jesus' calls us to: prayer, alms giving and fasting,

As you think about this call to righteous living, which of the three of these do you find most challenging or confronting? Does one of the three come easier for you than the others? Taking time to ponder questions like these as you enter into Lent can aid in discerning how God is inviting you to engage and help us to

identify what it is that might be aiding or stopping you from engaging these practices.

Jesus himself prayed, fasted, and tended to the poor. So it should be no surprise that he would expect us as followers to do the same. Yes, Christ and the Lenten season ask much of us — seemingly more than our other church seasons. Yet, if we are honest, we know that righteous living is what we are called to by Jesus every day. It is just inside of this season that we take intentional time to delve deeper, to commit to strengthening and growing our relationship with God, so that we might live, love and serve with consciousness and intention, until the time of our resurrection.

How then, are we lean in and better practice righteous living?

We know that Jesus begins by reminding us to be mindful about how we present ourselves in public and to avoid calling attention to ourselves. Repeatedly, he directs us to do our practice in private, away from the public eye. The work of Lent begins here, in our hearts and within the inner sanctum between us and God. We may think we have to do it all, or do it all perfectly — but Jesus' call to righteousness isn't a call to moral

perfection. What Jesus asks of us is to examine our thoughts, words and actions, and to notice if they have been aligned with God's priorities or have been self-serving. If the former, can we expand upon them? If the latter, we then have an opportunity to repent, make amends and begin anew.

None of the three is more or less important than the other, but rather they are interconnected.

Through one lens, one might posit it is first Prayer informs our consciousness which helps us to be more present to the needs of others, thus aiding us in responding to those needs, and that in Prayer, we ask God for the courage and strength to intentionally fast, to practice self-denial or abstention, so to make for space for something new to arise, for God to enter in.

Another view suggests that it is first by fasting: an act that can help us become aware of what it is to hunger, what it is to do without; an act that helps us identify the things to which we are attached that get between us and God, so that we in our awareness of these things, we may become more compassionate to the suffering and needs of others, and thus more eager to meet God in prayer.

And certainly, extending ourselves to those in need helps to keep us aware of our own privilege, of the abundance we have and perhaps can aid us in identifying and letting go of things we simply do not need, or which do not aid us in our discipleship. When we see the suffering of others, it is natural that our hearts would want to reach out to God in prayer, asking for their healing, and asking for the wisdom to serve them generously and well.

Yes, one without the others is lacking. It is when we commit to the intentional practice of all three, that the fullness of our righteous life is to be found.

I encourage you to take time to think about how and where prayer, helping the needy and fasting intersect for you, again noticing which comes easiest, and which demands the most of you? (You might want to pay attention to that one!)

Then, commit to God, and maybe share with a trusted friend (accountability partners are amazing) your hopes and intentions for this Holy Lent. How might you hope to draw nearer to God through these three practices. How might you ask God, or someone else to support you? Then, write it down-and keep it in a place where

you can see them every day. On the fridge, or even better, on the bathroom mirror!

Remember, every spiritual discipline is intended to train our hearts. In fact, there is no other way to train the heart than with specific behaviors, spiritual practices designed to draw us closer to God and help us to love and serve with humility and generosity. My prayer for you this Ash Wednesday is that God meets you in the depths and breadth of this Holy Lent —That you may find your hunger for God in fasting; that you may find your love for God in tending to the suffering; that you may find God, in prayer.