

Betty Deerwester
Joel 2:12-18
Second Corinthians 5:20-6:2
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

ASH WEDNESDAY
EPIPHANY CATHOLIC CHURCH
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Many years ago, I had a granddaughter in kindergarten. She asked me if I knew about Lent and getting ashes, and I told her yes, I knew about Lent and that I had received ashes every year from when I was as young as she was. Looking at me with troubled eyes, she said, "Grammy, when I get ashes, will I get all those lines on my forehead like you have?"

Tonight, we will be signed with ashes, reminding us that God created us and that we will return to God. The first reading from the prophet Joel insists we are called to a complete conversion of heart. "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart.

This reading reminds me of a family with three girls; the oldest two were close in age, and the youngest was eight years younger. She watched her sisters and mother cook; she was envious of the day she would be old enough, and at seven, she thought she was. On a Saturday, getting up very early, everyone was asleep, so she tiptoed into the kitchen, excited because she was going to surprise the family with pancakes. She pulled a chair up to the cabinet. While reaching for the flour, she spilled it on the floor. She then knocked the eggs off the counter. Unable to pick up the eggs, she sat on the kitchen floor and sobbed. Looking up, her dad was standing in the doorway; she thought she would be grounded for life. Walking with open arms through the mess, her dad said, "Come here to me, hugged her, and said, "I will help you clean up this mess." That little girl was me.

Tonight, God whispers to each one of us, "Come to me, no matter what you have done, and I will help you clean up your mess." God invites us as God invited the Israelites. Return to me with all your heart. Will we respond, will we hesitate, will we refuse the invitation.

The simple truth is God wants a relationship with us, just as we are. What creates distance in our relationship? St. Augustine said, our hearts are restless until they can rest in God. He talked about how we turn inward to ourselves and are concerned only about our needs, wants, plans, likes, and dislikes. St. Augustine was talking about our ego. The ego's job is to make us feel better about ourselves; it is okay to be self-centered, self-absorbed, and take care of ourselves first. The ego is our identity, ambition, significance, and worth. Ego sees the faults in others and avoids our own shortcomings; hence there is no conversion. In varying degrees, our lives can become centered around our ego and take priority over us growing our personal relationship with God. The spiritual journey is about turning outward to God and others. The more ego, the less room we have for God. Tonight, we say EGO means "Edging God Out."

Lent is an opportunity to awaken from our apathy, distractions, and busyness and to reflect on who we really are. An opportunity for a spiritual inventory that invites us to reflect honestly and recognize our brokenness, self-centeredness, and the impulses that control us. To lower our armor and walls of defensiveness, allow ourselves to be vulnerable and be honest with God. Trust that if we let go of our Ego, things that are not of God, we will experience hope and healing.

Our readings call us to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, which we are to live daily as Catholic Christians. In Lent, we recommit to these practices. Return to me with prayer. Prayer challenges our hunger, and our deepest hunger is for God. Do we pray, or are we too busy? Do we pray to be noticed by others, or do we pray to be noticed by God? Do we only pray for our needs, wants, and desires, or do we pray for the needs of others, concerns for our community, and those suffering throughout the world? Does our prayer life consist of an hour at the weekend Mass? What is our relationship with God? Do we "Edge God Out," or will we take time this Lent to grow closer to God?

Return to me with fasting. Fasting challenges our desire for gratification. Fasting is about freeing us from what binds us. What consumes us? Social media, the phone, television? What do we hold onto? Anger, grudges, bitterness, negativity? What controls our life? When we fast from what controls our life, our Ego or self-gratification, we create room for God. Fasting is about changing our hearts and experiencing an interior conversion.

Return to me with almsgiving. Almsgiving challenges our self-absorption. Do we edge God out by our blindness to the realities around us, which cry out like a siren in the night for our attention? Do we edge God out by failing to be involved in

controversial issues such as the environment, racism, and immigration? Do we say, what can I do, or do we become complacent? Do we simply write a check and allow others to do the work versus getting involved?

Now is the time, the time for us to become brutally honest. Lent invites us to look in the mirror and see ourselves as God sees us. Recognize what we hide from that lies deep within us, our brokenness, and our wounds. Lent is a time to acknowledge them, humbly accept God's grace, transform our lives, and lift us out of our overgrown Egos.

Return to Me who created you, even now, and allow Me to change your life. I will help you clean up your mess. It is never too late. How will we respond? Will we say yes to God's invitation and grace and be a new person on Easter, or will we simply be six weeks older?