

February 26, 2020
Ash Wednesday
United, Oak Park

No Tweeting about This

For people who wouldn't think of doing something significant in their lives without posting it to their Facebook page or tweeting about it, today poses a particular challenge. If we engage any of the Lenten disciplines that are common to this season, Jesus' instruction in the gospel according to Matthew urges us not to broadcast anything about it: "...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 Jesus gave similar admonitions to his disciples about prayer and fasting as well.

So much from this chapter of the gospel according to Matthew is counter-cultural. Why do something good for yourself or others if you can't get *credit* for it in some way? In an age of constant self-promotion where we may be trying to convince our worth to employers, and colleagues, and anyone else in a circle of friends, if no one else

recognizes the good things that we've done, then why would we do them?

Jesus' answer is quite simply that we give alms, pray, and fast solely to benefit others, and only to be seen by our heavenly father. If there are to be rewards of any kind at all for our generosity or spiritual discipline, they will come to us strictly from God, and in secret.

So don't go looking for how many people have responded to a kind or generous thing that you've done by liking it on Facebook or retweeting it to any of their own followers. Just the knowledge of having done something good for the community and for the world beyond is its own reward.

And so it is that we begin this austere season with some stern counsel. Just at a time when we are encouraged to do with a bit less while also giving a bit more, we are discouraged from doing something that would draw attention to any of the good that we are doing and that might return some praise our way. Yet if we can keep our motives in check, we may also have the satisfaction of knowing that we are acting

with pure hearts while we take on some of the spiritual disciplines that are central to this season.

Of course the disciplines in which we are asked to engage in this season of Lent are nothing other than spiritual practices that would probably be good for us at all times. Can we imagine this season of introspection—beginning with an extended examination of our sinful condition this evening—as an opportunity for us to grow further into becoming people who are *more open* to serving others as Christ has served us, *less neglectful* of human need and suffering, *less prone* to making unkind assessments of our neighbors, while *exhibiting greater care and concern* for the created environment?

While it would probably be unwise for us to try to make several new commitments along these lines in the coming six weeks, we might consider just one of the bids from the confession of sin this evening as a prompt for us toward making *some positive change* in our lives—even one that could become permanent—not just to be endured for a short while and then to be abandoned with the dawn of Easter morning.

Might this week be the beginning of a practice in our lives that could become life-altering?

Perhaps. But developing a life-time change won't occur instantaneously like the flip of a light switch. Very likely we will need to consider very deeply what new supports and different life habits will need to change in order to achieve a new goal or way of living. We will need to consider all the impediments that might stand in the way for us to reach a new goal or to develop a new spiritual practice. And then begin to identify all the resources that we will need in order to make the new spiritual practice a reality.

Just last month I realized that the road to significant weight loss for me began during a brief conversation with a spiritual director at least three years ago. I had already identified what I needed to do for my own health. But then my spiritual director asked me what it would take for me to achieve it.

I knew then that I would need many different forms of encouragement and guidance along the way, and finding just one thing was not going to make it happen. In fact it took me the better part of a

year before I had really determined what resources were going to be helpful in getting it together. The ELCA's health benefits program provided some resources in managing blood sugar and weight. My physician for the past seven years has also provided me with significant encouragement in a gentle though direct way. Going to a local fitness center four to five times a week made a huge difference. Finding which foods to eat that would make me feel full without also adding too many calories has been a constant discovery process. Relatives, colleagues, and friends have been supportive. And along the way I've had to practice daily discernment of saying no to many foods that are not helpful, while unapologetically also putting exercise as a major priority.

While much of the progress that I have achieved can be measured objectively, I also know that the process of getting to where I am today began with spiritual discernment. And in many ways it's in response to words in the confession of sin we use this evening that acknowledge self-indulgent appetites and ways. I knew that those things were challenges for me, and I asked for God's help to overcome them.

So what kind of change might God be calling on you to make as you reflect on the challenges in your life this evening during our confession of sin? What spiritual practice do you deeply want to develop?

Certainly if we do take on any spiritual practices in order to be more mindful about caring for what God has given us, as well as being much more attentive to serving God and the world's needs, we will need considerable help and encouragement. May we all discover the support we truly need in the coming weeks of Lent.