

ASH WEDNESDAY - A, B, C
“Lent – a Time of Repentance and Healing”
(Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51; 2Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

A dishonest painter hired to paint a church building thinned his paint with water. As long as it didn't rain he would be okay he thought. That night there was a rain storm. He ran to the Church in the morning and saw that the paint was running down the walls and forming letters. As he got closer he could make out the words that read, “Repaint, you thinner, and thin no more.”

What is the biggest room in the world? The answer is the “room for improvement.”

This Lent, be reconciled with God, your self and others.

Reconciliation involves change. Another word for this change is repentance. The Greek word for repentance or change is *metanoia* which means to “turn around.” It is interesting that the word for “paranoia” means “to keep on running, denying, escaping”. Our modern day society does too much of that – escape the pain of being human by medicating it with addictions of all kinds. Though we know that escaping is not the answer, it is hard to change, so this time of Lent is a support for our effort to change our lives and our hearts.

Traditionally, the Church suggests three important actions during Lent – prayer, almsgiving and fasting. These three actions are connected with the Great Commandment that Jesus gave: “Love God with all your mind, heart, strength and soul, and Love your neighbor as you Love yourself.” This commandment summarizes the teachings of the whole bible, and the teachings of the elders. The three suggested actions for Lent also connect with our deep human need to be loved, to belong, and to be valued.

Prayer is a way to love God, to connect with His love for us, and to love God back. We pray when we worship and praise God; we pray when we ask God for help, and when we thank God for his aid. And we pray when we simply sit there and soak up God's love. Prayer is perhaps our best way to love God, and to answer our deep human need to be loved.

Almsgiving is a way to love others. Almsgiving could be giving material things, like money to someone who needs it. Perhaps more important is to give of our selves, our time and attention, to others, especially to young people. We can also give alms by giving compliments to others, by affirming them. That is a powerful way to love others, to help them live. We give alms whenever we communicate with love to another, when we share our thoughts and feelings with them in trust, and listen to their thoughts and feelings with acceptance and understanding. This kind of almsgiving is also a way to answer our deep human need to belong to others.

Fasting is a way to love one's self. To fast is to pay attention to our own bodies and persons. Most of us clutter our lives with too much of everything – too much food, activity, noise and movement. Fasting for us might mean to simplify our lives, to cut out some distractions, to create an empty space within ourselves where God can be God. We can also fast by letting go of grudges, and trying to forgive those who hurt us – that is a beautiful way of fasting. Then the food or activities that we give up will take on deeper meaning. Fasting is also a way of answering our human need to be valued – we pay attention to ourselves, to how we are living our lives on a day-to-day basis.

Archbishop Emeritus Peter has a friend who is a doctor. As busy as this doctor is, he always takes his family to Church on Sunday, and tries to spend Saturday with his family, putting clear boundaries on his professional activity on those days. The quality of his family life is well worth the sacrifices he makes. He is truly fasting, praying and giving alms.

The ashes we use, like holy water and sweet grass, are symbols of faith and inner attitudes. Let us be sincere, willing to change, to be healed, re-created, and these ashes today will take on the power of that faith intention, help us realize our prayer, and especially help restore to us the joy of salvation.

The Eucharist we celebrate now is our greatest prayer and in itself a call to repentance and healing. May our celebration today of God's Word, and Sacrament, touch our hearts and open us up to God's love, so that we may become the Body of Christ.

So, this Lent, repent and be reconciled to God, yourself and others by prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.