

**Sermon for February 10, 2016**  
**Ash Wednesday**  
**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

Lent is the 40 days before Easter that has been set aside as a time when we give special attention to our relationship with God. We make space and time for being with God and for asking how is it with my soul. During Lent we plan to spend time renewing and re-orientating our life to be more in line with what God intends for us.

Like us, the earliest followers of Jesus had a hard time maintaining a healthy relationship with God. We get busy, distracted, forgetful, neglectful and we let our relationship with God get put on the back burner. In today's Gospel reading we hear the three things that are tried and true to help us to renew our relationship with God. They are Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting.

Almsgiving isn't a word we hear too often in today's vocabulary. It means any material favor done to assist the needy and it is prompted by charity. The church has taught for centuries that the personal right to own property must be balanced with the personal responsibility and duty to care for the poor and needy.

Almsgiving isn't the same thing as the offering we give in worship. It entails a personal and direct act of doing good for those in need. It is something done over and above our regular offering to the church. It can't be delegated to others because an essential part of almsgiving is the heart of the giver. Almsgiving isn't almsgiving unless it is done with a personal, heart-felt, caring for the needy. And it especially isn't almsgiving if it is done with a superior or holier than thou attitude or for the approval of others; which is what Jesus is talking about in our reading.

At the heart of almsgiving is the belief that all things come from God, and all wealth is never our personal possession, but belongs to God, given to us in trust to be used for our good and for the good of the world. Therefore almsgiving isn't giving away our wealth; it is us sharing wealth entrusted to us with those whom God loves and wants to have a share in the wealth of the world. Almsgiving during Lent is meant to bring actual relief to the needy; to change our relationship with the needy; to transform our own understanding of and relationship with wealth.

A key for building our experience of—and delight in—God is prayer. Lent is a time to focus on the way of personal experience to know and understand God; and prayer is the way to gain this personal experience. There are many ways to pray and we are most familiar with “talking to” God ways of prayer. These are when we speak to God about our thanksgivings, our needs, our losses, our faults, our sicknesses, the needs of others, and our hopes and requests.

But we are less familiar with “listening to” God ways of praying. These ways of praying are meant to be a lifelong practice, but the 40 days of Lent are a good time to begin or deepen our practice of listening to God in prayer. God desires a relationship with us and prayer is one way to develop that relationship. Just as with any other relationship, hearing the other requires showing up, paying attention, staying focused, silencing our own chatter, genuinely desiring to hear the other, and genuinely feeling love for—and from—the other.

In our reading today Jesus isn't saying that we should never pray out loud in front of others, but that our prayers should be about building that relationship with God—not for show. So make a date to be with God, set a time and place, and show up. Prayer can

take many forms, find one that works for you and use it. God wants to hear from you and wants you to hear the response.

When we think of fasting we often think of these special cleanses where we drink only certain things or refrain from food altogether and drink only water. But fasting can take many forms. Ultimately fasting means to give up something that we hunger for everyday—be it wine, chocolate, cigarettes, watching TV, email, video games, and the list goes on.

Fasting in the religious sense is important for two reasons. First when we fast, we actually pause and experience our hunger instead of quickly feeding it. We then get to reflect on the hungers that drive our lives. Why is it that we are so busy doing what we do? What need, what hunger is so important that we give up our time for it?

Second, when we fast, we are invited to experience a deeper awareness of our hunger for God. Perhaps we have confused our hunger for God for something else? Food, shelter, safety, love, even life itself are all good, but they also are all temporary. Maybe we aren't satisfied because we have been neglecting the one and only truly eternal source of joy and peace? As Jesus tells us we can't live on bread alone. When we fast we have the opportunity to re-orient our impulses and daily living so that we enjoy the delight of good bread and the delight of our good God.

So let us take the time in the next 40 days to take an inventory of our relationship with God and to put it first in our lives. We may be surprised with the peace and joy that we find!

i "David Ewart, [www.holytextures.com](http://www.holytextures.com)"