

Please be seated. Seriously, try to relax. Maybe do some stretches. Get as comfortable as you can. This shouldn't be painful. It doesn't have to be, anyway. Only as painful as we make it to be. I'm referring to repentance. Many people have a visceral, negative reaction to that word. Repentance. You'd think I was talking about a trip to the dentist the way some people tense up. The word fundamentally means to turn. In the Church, it takes on the more specific meaning of seeking reconciliation with God by turning away from things that we know tend to separate us from God.

So when this work makes us uncomfortable, our discomfort is a byproduct of our faith. If we had no faith, we couldn't be concerned about being separated from God, much less about what it takes to be reconciled with God. So amid the somber ashes of this day there is hope.

But we are in church today for more than hope. Our purpose is nothing more or less than examining our consciences, our track records, the habits of our lives. If we are honest with ourselves, we will know where to look, or at least where to start looking, for things that separate us from God. And once we get past our discomfort and down to the business of taking stock, we can enjoy the catharsis of coming clean with ourselves as well as with God.

Most people shower or bathe every day before they leave the house, and (sniff) that seems to be the case for this congregation. Getting physically clean takes some effort, and some preparation, like having clean clothes ready to put on, for if all we did was return to our old clothes, our effort would have been wasted, and we make this effort regularly, every day, both because we know we'll feel better after we are done, and because we want the closer relationships that physical cleanliness enables. There are strong analogues between our practices of physical cleansing and our practices of spiritual cleansing.

Having that mindset shows us that any discomfort we might associate with repentance or penitence is not with the practices we use, like prayer, fasting, self-examination, self-denial, almsgiving, and study. Our discomfort is not with our God nor even with ourselves, but with our sins. When we look at them, we can see the pain they have caused ourselves and others, how they have distorted our nature and twisted our most noble qualities into grotesque mockeries. And yet, while I've never known anyone who wanted to hold on to their dirty bath water, sometimes we cling to our sins as if they had some value.

The act of holding on to old sins can be exhausting. There is so much work to do: self-deception, rationalization, pity, they all can consume us. Sins weigh upon us and

distract us from what we are really meant to be doing, like useless baggage on a long trip. Or perhaps sins are more like cheap knickknacks, wasting space on a store shelf; they have to be dusted but no one is going to buy any. As soon as we get real, we'll accept that these things have got to go, and we'll be glad to get rid of them.

There is more hope to be found here. Namely, that we can let go of our sins. God could be as rigid and unforgiving as humanity can be. God could force us to endure harsh punishment for our sins, or never set us free from them at all. But that is not the nature of our God. While God is a God of justice and righteousness, above all else, God is love. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. God wants to be in relationship with us, close, loving, joyous relationship.

Most people, most of the time, give little thought to the extensive infrastructure that has been built to allow us to clean ourselves easily every day, but if we stop to think about it, the manufacturing of soap and shampoo is a whole industry, which in turn is dwarfed by the feats of engineering involved in the collection, treatment, delivery, and heating of clean water. Likewise, Lent inevitably draws our attention to the infrastructure of our spiritual cleansing, the enormous lengths God is willing to go to in order to restore the relationship. At the end of Lent, on Palm Sunday and in Holy Week, we are reminded in great detail how God made the ultimate sacrifice for our sake. If any ask, where is their God, there is one place to which Christians can point in reverent silence: the Cross.

The passion and death of Christ loom over Lent like a leaden winter sky. For the next forty days, we will be walking slowly toward the foot of the Cross. We will also be focusing on the man who chose to bear its torment and shame for our sake. Lent, at its best, helps us to take our focus away from ourselves and place it on Christ. Even now as we engage in introspection about our own sins we must remember this is only a means to a much greater end. The risk is just as Jesus described. Practicing piety for its own sake is empty. Practicing piety for the sake of appearances is self-defeating. Rather, our observances take all their value from God, and their power from their ability to help us focus on God.

Ultimately this day and this season are not about sin, suffering, and self-flagellation. On the contrary, everything we do at this time of year is meant to help us to walk in love, as Christ loved us, to prepare ourselves to engage the profound mysteries of our sacred story, and ultimately to receive the gift of everlasting life that God has been preparing. Ashes and austerity are merely tools to achieve these spiritual ends. We use them like soap and water, as our reaction to our recognition that we are flawed and mortal and that our only hope is in Christ. And we know that Christ is

reconciling us to God, not because of our piety but out of pure love for us. See, now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation. We are treated as dying, and see— we are alive.