

On the first Sunday of every Lent: whether we are reading St. Matthew's Gospel in year A of the lectionary cycle, St. Mark's Gospel in year B – or as we do this year: St. Luke in year C --- we always have the same story: Jesus going into the desert, and being tempted there by the devil.

Make no mistake – this doesn't happen by coincidence – it happens on purpose.

The desert is far from a comfortable place – and it is definitely a place of discernment. In the desert one quickly decides what is life-giving, and what is deadly --- what is essential, and what is expendable.

The desert is a place for figuring out the difference between wants and needs, what is important and what is not.

That's why Lent always begins with time in the desert. For Lent is supposed to be an annual opportunity for personal transformation --- of coming out on the other side of the 40 days different than when we went in. And to do that well, most often we need to spend some time re-ordering the priorities in our life.

So the Church gives us three disciplines that can help us navigate our time of re-ordering in the desert: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

So a few questions to guide our discernment:

Do we have a healthy amount of unworthiness in our lives --- the type that keeps us humble –knowing that God is in charge and we are not. A relationship and understanding we nurture--- through prayer.

Do we have control over our wants and desires – or do we hedonistically feed the world's value for MORE: having more, doing more, going more, possessing more. . . Fasting helps us reign in those thoughts and feelings of needing more.

And do we have a real concern for others – cultivated by our realization of just how blest we are compared to so many others in the world? Almsgiving – our acts of charity – is our outlet for gratitude. Are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving priorities in our lives? Do we see them as essential or expendable? Things we do only when we have time or a desire – or things that we do as automatically as breathing? Now as Christians, it's not like we don't engage in prayer, fasting, and almsgiving the rest of the year – if we don't --- there is a real problem in calling ourselves a Christian. But it's just when these forty days roll around – we get a bit more intentional – or at least *hopefully* we get a bit more intentional – about these three disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

And perhaps in our intentionality for 40 days – we can establish a new standard which we keep throughout the year, once Lent gives way to Easter – and Easter to Ordinary Time.

Pope Francis has declared this year a Jubilee Year of Mercy – so during these days of Lent we also want to become intentional in our understanding and practice of mercy. Let's begin that process by trying to wrap our minds and hearts around what mercy is and isn't.

St. Thomas Aquinas once said that “ a person is said to be merciful, when they have a sorrowful heart” --

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They carry this sorrow because they are aware of being: hurt, wronged, mistreated, ignored, belittled, forgotten, left-out, betrayed, or disappointed at some point in their lives.

Because they have this awareness, they strive to dispel the sorrow carried by other people in their hearts --- and the effect of this action – is mercy.”

That's a lot to hear, much less digest – so let me repeat it. . .

St. Thomas Aquinas said that a merciful person is one who has a sorrowful heart – those who are aware they have been hurt, wronged, mistreated, ignored, belittled, forgotten, left-out, betrayed or disappointed at some point in their lives.

Having that awareness in their own hearts: they strive to dispel the sorrow carried by others— and the effect of this action is called ---- mercy.

Mercy, then, is a choice: of letting one's own heart be touched by the pain and suffering of another. Mercy is not a passive sentiment – it is neither pity nor a feeling of superiority --- it is a connection of one heart to another. It has as its goal the effort to move things in the right direction – toward the unity and peace that will come with the in-breaking of God's kingdom in our lives and our world.

Mercy is what happens when we stand in another person's shoes – and feel their pain – just as Christ felt our pain during his life on earth.

We fail at being merciful when our world is too small and our sight too narrow – and we get too wrapped up in our own selves.

Which is why focusing on mercy during Lent makes so much sense – when we are trying to bring things into proper perspective --- using the time to re-prioritize our lives in order to come out on the other side differently than when we went in.

Using the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – we can move beyond our wants to our needs – to discern what is important and what is not:

And as we re-prioritize our lives – thinking less of ourselves and more of others --- we can become merciful.

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