

Practicing Lent: Cleaning Our Messy House

Ruth Haley Barton

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”
Psalm 51: 10

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of working as an artist-in-residence at a parochial school, teaching children how to write poetry using the psalms as a model. One little boy wrote a poem entitled “The Monster Who Was Sorry.” He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response (in the poem) is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: “Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’”

“‘My messy house’ says it all,” Norris observes. “With more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out...he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?”¹

Spring Cleaning for the Soul

Today is Ash Wednesday—the beginning of the Church’s observance of the Lenten season. This is a season in which we are called to stop whatever we are doing, no matter how important it might be, and do some spring cleaning of the soul. We are invited to enter more intentionally into the disciplines of prayer, self-examination and

repentance for the purpose of renewal and restoration. We are willing to sit in our messy house and get a little more honest about the fact that we are in disarray. To the best of our ability we acknowledge what got us into the mess we are in, to feel our remorse and say, “I wish I hadn’t done that.” This is truth in the inward being.

Many of us have a hard time admitting that our house is messy. We have many ways of distracting ourselves from *knowing* truth in the inward being and seeing ourselves and our lives as they truly are. The renewal of our hearts and souls begins with a willingness to be honest about the ways in which we have given ourselves over to distraction, to half-truths, and to sin. It is the willingness to be honest about the ways in which we feel distant from God and to tell as much truth as possible about how we got there. *You desire truth in the inward being*, the Psalm reading for today points out. *Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

Oftentimes, the practice of entering into the Lenten season has been reduced to the question: “What are you giving up for Lent?” This is a fine question but it can only take us so far. The *real* question of the Lenten season is *how will I clear out the junk and garbage in my life so that I can be restored to God in some fresh way? What are the disciplines that will open up space for God to create a clean heart and new spirit in me?*

Shaping Your Lenten Discipline

To begin, we might consider disciplines of abstinence that help us clear out the clutter of things we distract ourselves with and depend upon that are not God. Whether we fast from foods that comfort our emptiness, from caffeine or alcohol that keep us stimulated, from aspects of media or technology that keep us distracted, from words that

keep us overly-enamored with our own thoughts, from mindless spending that keeps us numb, from addiction to the spotlight that keeps us dependent on other people's praise...disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence help us to clear the decks for spiritual action. As we clear out the clutter in our souls, we become more finely attuned to what is really going on in our lives spiritually and the invitations that are there for us. As we experience a broken and contrite heart in the face of what we are seeing, the way is opened for God to teach us wisdom in our secret heart.

Ash Wednesday is also a day when we are invited to consider how we might shape our Lenten season in *positive* ways by entering into practices that are uniquely suited to the invitations that emerge in the context of this deeper self-knowledge. The Gospel reading for today (Matthew 6) highlights concrete disciplines that have the potential to loosen the grip of sin and distraction in our lives, thus creating more space for God. As we invite God to guide us in shaping our own Lenten disciplines, we might ask:

- *How will I give?* (v. 2, 3) Lent is a time for “giving things up” balanced by “giving to” those in need.
- *How will I pray?* (v. 5-13) As we “give up” some of our usual distractions, it creates more space for prayer. Perhaps there is a prayer practice (such as fixed hour prayer) that God is inviting us to during Lent.
- *Who do I need to forgive and from whom do I need to seek forgiveness?* (v. 14, 15) Seeking forgiveness and offering forgiveness creates space for God's grace to flow in our lives.
- *How will I fast?* What do I need to abstain from in order to create more freedom and space for God? (v. 16-18)
- *What earthly treasures am I attached to and how can I let go?* The way we use our time, financial resources and energy reflect powerfully on what we treasure. Is there any specific way in which God is inviting us to “let go” of our attachment to some earthly treasure—at least for this season? (v. 19-21)

Lent is the season in which winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance—in the outer world and in our own souls. Rather than approaching Lent as drudgery or as a requirement, these questions help us approach Lent as an opportunity. One liturgy refers to Lent as “this joyful season” because it is meant to lead us into the Church’s springtime, a time when out of the darkness of sin’s winter, a repentant, empowered people emerges.² May it be so!

A Symbol of Hope

Today many of us will receive the symbolic gesture of the imposition of ashes on our foreheads as a way of acknowledging our human finiteness and mortality. No matter who we think we are, the traditions of Ash Wednesday remind us that “you are dust and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19) What a wonderful reminder this is to those of us who are in Christian leadership—that we are, after all, only human. This is not meant to be morbid, it is just meant to limit our grandiosity and help us to stay in touch with the real human condition we all share.

Ash Wednesday initiates a season of deeper self-awareness regarding all the ways in which we distract ourselves from paying attention to what is most needed in our life with God. But as we discover ways to clear out the clutter, we are able to welcome God’s presence deeper into our lives—including the messiest rooms of our house. The ashes marking our foreheads carry the same meaning contained in the Old Testament practice of covering oneself with ashes: they are an outward sign of inward repentance and mourning as we become aware of our sin. But they are also a sign hope.

Facing our sin in the shadow of Christ’s cross and impending resurrection is the healthiest way to deal with the knowledge of our sin. Strangely enough, then, the practice of receiving the ashes marking us with the sign of the cross is a powerful symbol of hope—hope that there is a path for being cleansed, purged, renewed and restored. *“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”*

A Prayer for Entering into Lent

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer. Amen.

~Book of Common Prayer

¹ *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 2003), p. 4, 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

For a listing of Lenten Lectionary Readings, go to www.thetransformingcenter.org/pdf/lectlent10.pdf

For a listing of recommended Lenten Resources, go to www.thetransformingcenter.org/pdf/lentres09.pdf

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