

**Gospel — Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18**

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Take care not to perform righteous deeds  
in order that people may see them;  
otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.  
When you give alms,  
do not blow a trumpet before you,  
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets  
to win the praise of others.  
Amen, I say to you,  
they have received their reward.  
But when you give alms,  
do not let your left hand know what your right is doing,  
so that your almsgiving may be secret.  
And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

"When you pray,  
do not be like the hypocrites,  
who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners  
so that others may see them.  
Amen, I say to you,  
they have received their reward.  
But when you pray, go to your inner room,  
close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.  
And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

"When you fast,  
do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.  
They neglect their appearance,  
so that they may appear to others to be fasting.  
Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.  
But when you fast,  
anoint your head and wash your face,  
so that you may not appear to be fasting,  
except to your Father who is hidden.  
And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

**Homily — *Lent is Spiritual Training***

A couple of men were standing by the side of the road and cars were whizzing by and they held two signs, one that said, "Repent." The other sign said, "Turn your life around." Cars just ignored them; whizzed by. Shortly after passing the signs, there was a consistent squeal and

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"ploosshhh." This continued for several minutes until the one guy turned to the other guy and said, "Do you think we should change the signs and just say the bridge is out?"

I love that little story because it illustrates that sometimes religious language hides the fundamental truths of our life. We can get caught up in terms as simple as "repentance" and think that that has absolutely nothing to do with our everyday life. In reality, it has everything to do with our daily life. The Lenten season that we begin today dates way back to the beginning of the third century. St. Irenaeus, who was a bishop in France at the time, wrote to the Pope asking for instructions on how to prepare for Easter. That's the earliest reference that we have to Lent in the year 203; the very beginning of the third century. In that letter, Irenaeus refers back to a much older tradition that probably goes back to the Apostles, of this time of preparation for Easter.

That letter says exactly what this season is about. It's not repentance for the sake of repentance. It's not prayer for the sake of prayer or fasting for the sake of fasting or almsgiving for the sake of almsgiving. It's to purify our hearts so that when we enter into the joy of the resurrection, we know who we are and we are ready to go there. This day of Ash Wednesday, and marking ourselves with ashes, has a long history as well. Christians have been marking themselves with the sign of ashes for 1,000 years. Anything that lasts for 1,000 years has to have a lot of power in it, otherwise it would just fade away as an accretion to the faith.

There's something in us that needs an outer symbol, isn't there? It says, 'I know what this season is about. I want to turn my life around because I recognize there are a lot of bridges in my life that are out.' The infrastructure of our lives needs to be funded. That's what this season is about. For almost 2,000 years, dating back to the beginning of the third century, people doing exactly what we're doing today.

The Catholic evangelist Matthew Kelly has a good insight. He says, "There's a difference between trying and training." If we said, "I really want to run a marathon," and we decide, "tomorrow I'm going to run the marathon." How many of us would be able to do that? I don't think any of us, unless we've already been training. I'm not a marathon runner myself, but there are lots of marathon runners within my family and friends. If we want to run a marathon, we have to train for it. That's a daily preparation. It's a discipline of our bodies so that we can go the distance. Think of Lent as this period of spiritual discipline and spiritual training for what lies ahead.

There are three traditional disciplines in Lent aren't there: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Notice in today's Gospel, when Jesus refers to them, he assumes that his audience is doing that. He assumes that they're praying. He assumes that they're fasting. He assumes that they're giving alms. His emphasis is, "Don't do it publicly. Don't do it for show. Do it for the right reason." We recognize that we need to discipline and change our hearts.

Think about those three disciplines for just a moment. Praying. All of us are praying. We're here today and we're praying, but think of the fruit of prayer [tosses an apple] and I'd invite you to reflect in a very specific and concrete way: How might my prayer change in this season of Lent? What do I want to continue? What do I want to stop? What do I want to start? We can't do everything but we can do something. Don't make your Lenten program so ridiculously difficult that a week into it you're just going to give up in discouragement. Hopefully our Lenten

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resolutions are going to be better than our New Year's resolutions. Think about your prayer: What do I want to start? What do I want to continue? What do I want to stop? This activity helps us draw into a deeper intimacy with Jesus.

Number 2: Prayer and fasting. Think of fasting as symbolized by this onion [tosses an onion]. There are some things that we need to take off [peels outer skin from onion]. Fasting isn't just about shedding a few pounds, it's again, a spiritual discipline of recognizing that as we discipline our bodies, we pray that we can discipline our souls. There's something bitter about that. Who enjoys fasting? Even so, do we recognize that we need to do that? Yes, absolutely. Think of fasting as not just fasting from food, but what are the activities in your life that are getting in the way of a deeper relationship with Christ? Where does our flesh need to be disciplined? Where does Satan have his tentacles in us?

Think of fasting as not just fasting from food, it may be fasting from television; it may be fasting from the screens in your life. How much time are you wasting on the Internet? How much are you obsessed with checking out news channels? I read about a Jewish family recently that on their celebration of the Sabbath, for 24 hours, they fast from all screens: television, Internet—both of them were highly plugged in. Think of the things that we need to give up so that we can embrace, more fully this season of Lent. It's a season of letting go and holding on...letting go and holding on.

The third traditional discipline in the midst of Lent is of course, almsgiving. Almsgiving is recognizing that we're in this journey together; that none of us go through life by ourselves. There's a sweetness in life. God has blessed us with time upon this Earth. God has blessed all of us with talents. God has blessed us with a certain amount of treasure. The call of almsgiving is fundamentally a call to compassion. It is a call to recognize the needs of our brothers and sisters around us. It's entering into this holy game of life as if it were a game of catch [tosses an orange to a woman in congregation] and in that back and forth [plays catch with her], think of our Lenten activities as interactive activities between us and the community of faith; especially those who are in greater need; that we might taste the sweetness of life.

Any one of these disciplines is of course, critical to the process. We need to be people of prayer. We need to be people who fast. We need to enter into almsgiving. What the church has been doing since the third century [juggles the apple, onion and orange], is praying, fasting and almsgiving...prayer, fasting and almsgiving. In this holy trinity, we grow closer to the Holy Trinity of grace.

Amen. (Amen.)