

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” We’re to practice our piety in secret, whether giving alms, praying or fasting, and in each Jesus tells us “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Hearing these words today, on the first day of Lent, means what we do isn’t to be done for an audience. All these things that Jesus listed, giving alms, praying and fasting, are places where we encounter God. We encounter God in the depths of our being, places that are beyond our consciousness, beyond our sight.

But we often think of our practices during Lent as an area where we can get rewards, a spiritual version of frequent flyer miles, plus the odd bonus of perhaps a bit of weight loss if we’re fasting, especially if we tell others we’re doing it. Give, pray, fast (if medically advised), but don’t advertise what you’re doing. God, who sees in secret will see more than just our accomplishment, he will see much deeper than that.

Giving alms, that is, giving to those in need, is a classic practice during this season of Lent, in fact half of the offerings we receive at our Wednesday evening services will go to our local food shelf, the other half will go to ELCA World Hunger. Giving alms might also be expressed in action, e.g., working at the Salvation Army food kitchen in Virginia, prison ministry, supporting LSS in Duluth in the building of the shelter for homeless youth. Giving alms brings us to the edge of human need where we find that in helping the hungry, the suffering, the abused, we are keeping company with them, directly, or perhaps indirectly. Our satisfaction with the world around us may be shaken, as we are transformed. That’s the real cost, not giving a bit of our time, talents or treasure, for we become more compassionate.

God changes our lives, we perhaps become a bit more unsettled, a bit more uncomfortable with the world around us. Transformation.

So we may pray more often than is our wont during these forty days of Lent. Perhaps we attend Wednesday services as well as Sunday services, maybe we add prayer time, meditation time. We keep it up and discover that our prayer is dust before God. Our devotions might be eloquent and enjoyable but we find ourselves distracted, uncertain, we find ourselves often starting over. It may be that we discover our words are empty, our silence is shallow, we perhaps discover the paucity of our prayer, and in this discovery we recognize how generous is our God. We realize that our prayers don’t change God, but God changes us, helping us, maybe even forcing us to recognize who we are.

Fasting might take the form of skipping a meal, abstaining from chocolate, alcohol or cookies. Maybe we give up television or social media during Lent, maybe you even resolve to give up grumpiness or gossip. Whatever we give up, meals or food for example, might trim a few pounds from our frame, but that’s not the point. The point is

that we abstain from something, and we find we are emptying ourselves, recognizing our frailty and need, our dependence upon the food chain, entertainment, we find we cannot live on bread alone, but without bread in it's every form, whether food, clothing, shelter, we can't live at all.

We find that the hungers of the flesh remind us of our spiritual hunger and that's what we need to truly live the lives we are called by God to live. We find a hunger for God, a longing for God, for the true bread from heaven. We fast and we are changed, we realize that it isn't our accomplishments, or our failures that define us, but our need for God, our need for the holy.

Lenten practices aren't an achievement, they're not something we cross off the old bucket list. Instead we seek exposure of our emptiness, transformation, and becoming a living witness to the power and grace of God.

AMEN