

We have been given the gift of yet another Lent. We all know that living of a life that is supposed to be about 'love of God and love of neighbor' is a challenging reality on the best of days. We stumble frequently, and sometimes we just need to feel like we can start over again. And we can. Always. Our God is so good, understanding, and merciful. And He gives us this Lent to try, yet again, to allow our hearts to be changed.

Every year this same Ash Wednesday gospel offers us three suggestions for how we should go about our Lent – prayer, fasting and almsgiving. My suspicion is that the first one – prayer – is the key to the other two.

But let's examine first an even deeper question. Why should we do anything in the first place? Why bother with yet another attempt at conversion, with trying to change? Ah because we were made for love. We are made for intimacy with each other and with God. We have restless, aching human hearts, and we look for a way of stemming that pain of restlessness inside. We know in our heart of hearts that all the goods in the store window, all that is digitized or appears on a flat screen are not the answer. But they are all very alluring. And if we are not careful, we are easily distracted and lose our way. Instead of longing for God, we anesthetize and distract ourselves by focusing our desires on the so-called 'good life' – on sex, on money, on success, and on whatever else we think everybody else has. There is nothing inherently bad about these things, but if we define our deepest longings as directed toward these things in themselves, we end up disappointed and empty. Our disquiet persists and we remain restless and tired, drained of energy rather than in a place of centeredness where our very striving gives us energy.

Ultimately our restless aching is a yearning for God. We need to connect with God. We need prayer. We know this, both in our more reflective moments and in our more desperate moments. It is then that we feel our need for prayer and try to go to that deep place. But given our lack of trust and our lack of practice, we can easily struggle to get there. We often do not know how to pray or how to sustain ourselves in the effort. But there are no experts or gurus in prayer – any more than there are experts in friendship. There are simply people who prize prayer – and do it – and people who prize friendship – and are about it.

Whether we struggle to even believe in prayer, are a beginner in prayer, or are more advanced in prayer does not matter. There is no one way to pray. Our own experience can be our guide. We need to trust God's providence, and trust that what we most need in prayer will find us.

There is no bad way to pray and there is no one starting point for prayer. All the great spiritual masters offer only one non-negotiable rule: We have to show up for prayer and we have to show up regularly. Everything else is negotiable and respects our unique circumstances. St. Teresa of Avila, the great teacher of prayer, said "If you intend to pray, and you spend the time, you prayed. It doesn't matter how it feels, whether or not you think it was productive. If you spent the time, you prayed. God gave you exactly the prayer that you needed at that moment of your life." She also says "Pray as you can." Then she wisely adds: "Many people spend years trying to pray as they cannot."

The biggest thing is to open up -- so that in that most intimate part of ourselves we can more clearly hear God and others say: "I love you!" For only that can make us whole.

We heard the passage from the 5th chapter of Luke's gospel just a few weeks ago. It captures, in a rather stark metaphor, our need for prayer. One morning, after Simon Peter, James, and John have 'toiled all night' and caught nothing – no fish, only their own emptiness – Jesus came to them and invited them to go out

to in the deeper waters, to “put out into the deep.” They did, and they caught so many fish their boat began to sink.” (Lk 5:1-7)

That’s what prayer is about – an invitation from Jesus: Especially when we feel like we are catching nothing but our own emptiness, it is time to “put out into the deep.” (all of this adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, PRAYER: OUR DEEPEST LONGING, p. vii-ix) So spend 10-15 minutes every day of Lent praying. Hear God tell you that you are His beloved one in whom He takes His delight. It’s all He ever wants to say to any of us. And when you know that you are God’s beloved one – down to your very toes – your life will never be the same again. Only prayer can give us this.

Second, Fasting. Forget giving up chocolate, dessert, wine, whatever. Fast from criticism; feast on praise. Fast from negativity; be positive. Fast from stinginess. Give generously.

Third, as far as the generosity goes -- it’s connected to almsgiving. I challenge every one of us to make ONE poor person’s life better because we have had Lent. Stretch a bit – give to the BAA, Catholic Charities, Habitat for Humanity, Haiti Goat -- any of the dozens of organizations that need our financial and volunteer support. If one poor person’s life is made significantly better – then we will have a Lent – and a practice of almsgiving worthy of the name.

It’s a simple program – elegant in its simplicity. And God is with us through it all. Amen.