

We do Mardi Gras well – king cake, beads, parades and parties! Any excuse for a feast is welcome. But what do we do with the depressingly titled Ash Wednesday? A few years ago I saw a restaurant sign that summed up our cultural uncertainty about this date on the Christian calendar: “Ash Wednesday Seafood Buffet: All You Can Eat!”

I’d like to do a kind of grand overview of Lent in the few moments we have today. The Pelagians among us – those who think they can WORK their way into heaven tend to really get into Lent. It doesn’t matter that Pelagianism is a heresy that the church has been condemning for hundreds of years – there are still many people who think this is more about what WE do than what GOD does – and His grace!

The truth is that the vast majority of Christians have made Christianity into a set of morals and rules instead of an all-embracing love. Only love leads us to see God in everyone at every moment. Rules and scolding never converted anyone.

Moralism – as opposed to healthy morality – is the reliance on largely arbitrary morality codes, counted-up rituals (think rosaries and Masses and novenas), and dutiful ‘requirement’s’ that are framed as prerequisites for enlightenment. And these things are good and understandable as BEGINNINGS, but we can’t stay there as a child for a lifetime. We often look for something visible, seemingly demanding, and socially affirming to DO or NOT DO rather than undergo a radical transformation of mind and heart – to become LIKE GOD. So it is no wonder that Jesus so strongly warns against public prayer, public acts of generosity, and visible fasting in this passage we hear every year on Ash Wednesday. Yet that is mostly what we all set out to do during these next 40 days! We even ask one another: “What did you give up for Lent?”

But any external behavior that puts us on high moral ground is always attractive to the ego because, as Jesus says, “you have already received your reward” (Mt 6:2). Moralism and ritualism allow us to think we are independently ‘good’ or ‘holy’ – but can often be without love and mercy, without service to others, especially the poor and needy, or engaging deeply with anybody else. But that’s a far cry from the full and final participation we see Jesus offering -- or any outpouring love of the Trinity. (adapted from Rohr, posting of 9 September 2021)

Second, the whole purpose of Lent is to be TRANSFORMED – as the whole purpose of our life as followers of Christ is to BECOME TRANSFORMED. To become LIKE CHRIST, to have the loving, merciful, compassionate, inclusive heart of God. What does this transformed life look like?

The rest of this homily is adapted from a chapter in Richard Rohr’s book FALLING UPWARD – a great Lenten read if you are looking for one. Rohr says this about a transformed life. There is a gravitas to it, but this gravitas is held up by a much deeper lightness, or ‘okayness.’ Transformed disciples are characterized by a kind of bright sadness. This describes many wonderful older people we have hopefully all met. If we have met them, we know that they are transformed. There is still darkness, to be sure, but there is now a changed capacity to hold it creatively and with less anxiety – and no need to blame or shame others for what has gone wrong in life.

It is what John of the Cross called “luminous darkness,” and it explains the simultaneous coexistence of deep suffering and intense joy in the saints, which is almost impossible for most of us to even imagine. Eastern Orthodoxy believes that if something is authentic religious art, it would always have a bright sadness to it.

In transformed individuals, one has less and less need or interest in eliminating the negative or fearful, making again those old rash judgments, holding on to old hurts, or feeling any need to punish other people. Superiority complexes gradually depart. They do not fight things anymore; the fighting has just shown them too many times to be useless, ego based, counterproductive, and often entirely wrong. They have learned to positively ignore and withdraw their energy from evil or stupid things rather than fight them directly.

Those who are transformed fight things only when directly called and equipped to do so. We all become a well-disguised mirror image of anything that we fight too long or too directly. That which we oppose ends up determining our energy and framing our questions after a while – and we lose all of our interior freedom.

We learn that most frontal attacks on evil just produce another kind of evil in ourselves, along with a very inflated self-image to boot, and just incites a lot of push-back from those we attack. Think of the cold Grand Inquisitor in THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, or the young monk who tries to eliminate all humor in THE NAME OF THE ROSE, or those frowning Koran burners of Florida. Holier-than-thou people usually end up holier than nobody.

A transformed life requires prayer and discernment more than knee-jerk responses toward either the conservative or liberal end of the spectrum. Transformed souls have a spectrum of responses, and they are not all predictable. Law is still necessary, but it is not the guiding star, or even close. It has been wrong and cruel too many times.

The 8 Beatitudes speak to the transformed much more than the 10 Commandments. Ever notice that no one ever wants to put a stone monument of the 8 Beatitudes on a courthouse lawn? But the Beatitudes are not good for any war, any macho worldview, the wealthy, or our consumer economy. In a transformed state, a person works for change, quietly persuading, changing their own attitude, praying, forgiving instead of taking things to court.

The transformed heart sees life as spacious, like an expandable suitcase. Now they are just HERE, and here holds more than enough. And they have authority, influence. When a transformed person speaks, we lean in to listen.

The transformed soul knows that we are all in this together and that we are all equally naked underneath our clothes. When we are young, we define ourselves by differentiating ourselves; in transformation people look for the things we all share in common. They find happiness in likeness, which has become much more obvious. Creating dramas and separations has become boring. Transformed souls have no need to stand out, or be better than anyone else on the dance floor. Life is more PARTICIPATORY than assertive, and there is no need for strong or further self-definition. Think of 2 old lovers quietly dancing, safe and relaxed in one another's arms, and unconcerned whether anyone is watching. The dance is completely for its own sake.

The transformed soul has no need to prove that they or their group is the best, that their religion is superior or the only one God approves. They are not preoccupied with collecting more goods and services. The desire of the transformed heart is simply to pay back, to give back to the world a bit of what they have received. They realize that they have been gratuitously given TO – from the universe, from society, and from God. They try now, as Elizabeth Seton said, to “live simply so that others can simply live.”

God is no longer seen as small, punitive, or tribal. They once worshiped their raft; now they love the shore where it has taken them. They once defended signposts; now they have arrived where the signs

*“This is not claimed as original material; it is the fruit of years of reading and research, collated by volunteers, but not always correctly footnoted, or not footnoted at all. It was created solely for the purpose of an oral proclamation in the context of the liturgy of the church. Every effort has been made to provide the necessary attribution to the authors of the sources.”*

pointed. They now enjoy the moon itself instead of fighting over whose finger points to it most accurately, quickly, or definitively.

This bright sadness is such because the transformed soul is sad because it holds the pain of the larger world, and they wish everyone enjoyed what they now enjoy; but there is brightness because life is somehow – on some levels – still “very good,” just as Genesis promised.

The transformed soul does not have strong and final opinions about everything, every event, or most people, as much as they allow things and people to delight them, sadden them, and truly influence them. They no longer need to change or adjust other people to be happy themselves.

The transformed person is human life in its crowning, and all else is preparation and prelude for creating such a human work of art. The work is to aid and influence other people simply in being who they are. It's sad when old folks are still full of themselves and their absolute opinions about everything. Somehow they have not taken their needed place in the social fabric. We need deep and studied passion so much more than the superficial and loudly stated principles. The world needs peace and not anger, peaceful coexistence and not empire building.

The transformed soul seems to work with different rules. We see it in their freedom to give things away. Hoarding, possessing, collecting, and impressing others with their things, their house, or their travels are of less and less interest to them. Inner brightness, still holding life's sadness and joy, is its own reward, its own satisfaction, and their best and truest gift to the world. Such elders are the 'grand' parents of the world. Children and other adults feel safe and loved around them, and they themselves feel so needed and helpful to children, teens, and midlife adults. And they are. They are in their natural flow, the flow of grace. They open their mouths to bless others, encourage others, affirm others.

I pray that Lent will do this to us – to help transform us to become a more shining person, full of the things of Christ – love, compassion, forgiveness, peace. It would be a Lent worthy of the name, worthy of Christ. Amen. (adapted from FALLING UPWARD, p. 117-125)