

ARCHIVES LENT

INNER VIEWS
1ST Sunday of Lent - Cycle A

Immediately after his baptism we read that "Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be tempted by the devil." (Matthew 4:1).

The desert, the silent place of aloneness, is where we learn to live in the vastness of Trinity. In the desert we learn that it is not about us because we are about Trinity. Love comes from beyond us and love must continue to go beyond us. But it is up to us to set our priorities. What or who will we trust to be the source of our living?

In the desert Jesus is tempted by the instinctual drives that blind us to trusting that our resources come from being "Beloved...." Like all of us Jesus is offered substitutes for the source of his survival and security.

After forty days of fasting, the Tempter taunts him with the illusion of independence: "If you are the Beloved command these stones to become loaves of bread." (Matthew 4:1-10)
He taunts Jesus, "Prove that you are your own man." Jesus remains focused on the inner place where he experiences himself as "Beloved: and replies: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of Trinity."

The Tempter is persistent and this time throws Trinity's own words at him: *If you really are Beloved, "Throw yourself down [from the parapet] for it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus will not fall into the illusion of being separated from our Father: as if he had to test the Father's loyalty. "You shall not put the Lord, your Trinity, to the test." Love is freely given or it is not be love. Testing love feeds our fears, creates separation and binds love within the limitations of our mind.*

The final temptation is one of desperation for the Tempter: "All these (kingdoms of the world) I will give you if you bow down and worship me." Jesus knows from the depths of his soul that without Trinity possessing the whole world means nothing. Power is an illusion and cannot substitute for the intimacy of our Father. When Trinity is not the center of our lives we feel separated from the Source of our vitality and existence and react with defensive fear. And Jesus, who acts out of the freedom that love creates, replies "Get away you Satan! It is written: 'The Lord your Trinity, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve. (Deut. 6:13)'"

** Psalm 115:4-8

"...their idols, in silver and gold, products of human skills, have mouths but never speak, eyes, but never see...their makers will end up like them..."

Survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control are necessary for our well being. But when we feel separated from Trinity, from the Source of our living, they become distorted, self centered, and destructive distractions. We are made for so much more.

ARCHIVES LENT

We have not experienced the truth that our desire for survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control disconnects us from love and is the root of our unhappiness. Believing the teaching does not make it a knowing for us. We cannot believe deeply because we have no experiential knowledge that these desires cause pain, we cannot see how this teaching is relevant to us and our life. The desire for survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control must become undesirable or feel alien to our personality before we will let go of it.

Conversion, the movement of love toward the Lord, is a process of disenchantment with the ego and its desire for survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control. The only way we can ever be freed is to become aware of the pain (frustration) these desires cause. Only when we wake up to this painful reality will we begin find the need for something more satisfying. As St. Augustine said, "My heart is restless until it rests in you Lord."

The living experience of God's loving energy filling us with aliveness, with a savoring of this moment is our best chance to move beyond survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control. It's not that any one of these is evil in itself. It's just that they have become substitutes for the love of God which we come to know by loving. Using anyone of these in a loving way can move us beyond them. Using our power, whatever it is, to help others will help us begin to know God's loving presence working through us. Using our possessions to comfort others will help us know God's loving generosity alive within us. Using our prestige, our dignity and sense of worth by treating others with respect will help us know that our lives are more than we can create for ourselves, our lives are given out of love. Looking out for others will free us from being tied to our own survival. It will make room for God as the Source of our living.

INNER VIEWS First Sunday of Lent

Immediately after his baptism we read that "Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be tempted by the devil." (Matthew 4:1).

The desert, the silent place of alones, is where we learn to live in the vastness of God. In the desert we learn that it is not about us because we are about God. Love comes from beyond us and love must continue to go beyond us. But we are free to set our priorities. What or who will we trust to be the source of our living?

Jesus learns who he really is just like we do. He learns from others who act as mirrors to reflect back who they see in him. He also learns form the way he handles life experiences. In our lives we get a sense of our self when we don't get what we want. Our immediate reaction says more about our motivations than our intentions do. Intentions are only self expectations until we actually learn to live form them.

One of the Hebrew Testament's traditions about Satan is the one who tempts us in order to expose our true motivations (see Job 1:10). In this gospel Satan's temptations reveal Jesus' awareness of the reality and necessity of God as the foundation of his actions. Jesus' whole life will be an attempt to awaken us to this awareness of God as the source and center of our lives.

ARCHIVES LENT

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Survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control are necessary for our well being. But when we feel separated from God, from the Source of our living, they become distorted, self centered, and destructive. We are made for so much more.

Lent is the time of year when we are led into the desert to face our temptations, those attitudes, values and motivations that without our knowing separate us from God. It does no good to feel guilty or negative about them. This is God's mercy at work trying to alert us to the frustration that they create so that we can awaken to our need for God. God is always here loving us at every moment. We are always God's "Beloved." God's relationship to us never changes. It is as eternal as God is. But we need to learn to rely on God instead of the poverty of our own resources.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - STILLPOINT / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS - 2nd Sunday of Lent Cycle A
The Mountain of Divine Revealing

ARCHIVES LENT

As we continue these weeks of Lent we must keep the dazzling image of Jesus before us. It is Jesus' legacy to us, the beacon of our possibility. It entices us beyond the numbness of what seems to be our normal lives and awakens us to the gift and responsibility of divine partnership in bringing healing, peace, and justice into this world. For we too are meant to see ourselves mirrored in the Transfigured Jesus.

*One time Jesus took Peter, John and James up a mountain
not to razzle-dazzle them
but because they were frazzled and needed prayer.
"Up the mountain", the place where God waits to be met
but this time, not in a burning bush,
this time in a burning man, a man on fire, glowing
a glowing man, a man saturated with divine glory
a glory to his Father
a glory of his Father,
his Father's glory,
our brother in glory.*

*The glory also shone through the eyes of Peter, John and James
they too were glorified, and they could see Jesus for who he was
but they were still half asleep and missed that glory that gave light to their seeing,
in their half sleep it seemed like a dream, or a vision at best.*

*They dared not look into the face of Jesus and see their own face reflected.
They would cling to their sleep, until the nightmare of his crucifixion
awoke them to the reality of our Father's love radiating in their glory.
Their fearful bow kept their eyes down. Seeing the Father's glory would surely kill them.
Jesus touched them on the shoulder. "There is nothing to fear in the Father of Love."
And so they heard but no longer saw:
"This is my Beloved Son, hear him!"
Let him awaken you to glory.*

*Then Peter, John and James fell back into our normal half sleep..
They no longer saw the dazzle, their blindness returned.
"Do not tell anyone what you saw – until my death and resurrection reveals it in you."
And they went back down the mountain, not sure what they had seen*

The moment of Transfiguration is a revelation of what Jesus is all about. It is Jesus as he was experienced after his death and resurrection. His death stripped away his follower's blindness, like scales falling from their eyes.

We experience this same reality in the death of someone we love. Their death strips away the things we usually rely on to distract ourselves from the immense reality of death – power, possessions and prestige (this is what happened when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert.)

Death leaves us powerless, and we who are left behind are powerless to do anything about it but grieve. Death leaves us without possessions; "You can't take it with you." And death leaves whatever praise we have received as mere words. But the experience of Jesus' death left them with a new reality: They found that Jesus was still with them. They called this "Resurrection." Jesus, through the love of our Father, had conquered death.

ARCHIVES LENT

Death could not wipe out what was most true and real about Jesus. And Lent is supposed to reveal this as our own reality as well – death, because of Jesus, our Father and the Spirit cannot wipe out what is most true and real in us.

We too are beloved (baptized). We too must deal head on with the illusions (temptations) of power, possessions and prestige. This is the real meaning of fasting and mortification. We pervert them when we let our ego turn them into ways of proving our will power or love for Jesus. Jesus does not need us to prove ourselves, Jesus needs us to see clearly.

The Transfiguration of Jesus is a moment of seeing clearly. But notice that Jesus tells his followers not to tell anyone about what they've seen. This is because they don't understand what they've seen. After his death and resurrection the disciple John looks into the empty tomb and tells us, "I saw clearly **and** understood." (John 20:9) It takes time to fully strip away the blindness of our understanding.

We read about the Transfiguration in Lent because it is meant to challenge our blindness as well. Lent is about learning to see fully and clearly that which is not ordinarily seen. St. Paul tells us that "faith is hope in things unseen." Faith is a relationship with Jesus that gives us the ability to see clearly, beyond the blindness of our ego.

Here is a way of fasting that will feed our spirit so that we can see more clearly. Take a moment to relax. Take a few deep breaths and remind yourself the Jesus is with you, here and now, loving you and helping you see more clearly, just like he helped the disciples.

- 1) Take a moment to complete this sentence as many times as possible:
Who am I? _____
- 2) Now work with your list of self-descriptions. Imagine Jesus saying to you:

**"I tell you, do not be anxious about your life,
Whether you are _____**

(fill in the blank with one of the descriptions you have on your list and then continue to read).

"Your life- your reality - is more than that, and God's love for you does not depend on such qualities. Be secure in God's love, something you can rely on and not be anxious about."

- 3) All fasting is relaxing, letting go and releasing God's love to flow freely throughout your person. Continue to move down your list, each time being aware of how you feel letting go and fasting from this partial quality.

ARCHIVES LENT

On Ash Wednesday we were anointed with ashes, a reminder that nothing we do or nothing we have will endure. “You are dust and to dust you will return.” This stark statement is the kindest of truths, for it stops us from wasting our lives.

In last week’s gospel we read that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert so that he could face the illusion of separateness from God that we all live with. Satan plays on this by getting us to turn to other things besides God for our source and meaning. When we turn towards these we begin to be driven by fear, anxiety and anger. Jesus, of course resisted. And in today’s gospel we see the result: “While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzling white.”

Thomas Merton tells us “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time... the only thing is we don’t see it.” It’s not so much that Jesus changed as that his disciples saw him, for the first time, as he really was. And now, in hindsight, we should add “As we really are.” For this is our truth as well, if we could only see. Lent is a time to wake up to this reality.

We too overflow with God. We too burst from the heart of God, an outpouring of God’s love. We too exist because of the intimate closeness of God. We too radiate divine, dazzling being. This doesn’t mean that we are gods, it means we are God’s, we emerge from God and exist as God’s expression in time and space. God freely chooses us.

The main task of religion, the intense ambition of Lent, is to lead us to the realization of our essence. Religion speaks of this in many different images; returning “to the bosom of the Father,” “to the Father’s house,” “to the kingdom of God,” “to the heavenly city of Jerusalem,” “being saved or redeemed.” Actually there is no place we have to go. But wandering around lets us feel useful until we’re ready to let God transform our awareness.

The reason that this is so difficult, is that we have responded to the illusion of separateness from God by trying to take control of our lives. We are made of God and for God and when we lose awareness of this we feel fear and anxiety. Possessions, success, fame, power, and pride become easy substitutes for God. But deep down we still feel the separation and a longing for completion, we still long to return to our Source. That’s why we are left with the paradox that the only way to find God is to stop searching. The only way to be in control is to let go of control and let God be our center.

Prayer can dissolve this illusion. But it dissolves it very gently, as we let go of layers and layers of judgments and surrender to the gift of unconditional love. Prayer also takes us into the layers of hurt and anger, bitterness and resentment that have built up through the many disappointments and tragedies of our lives. These heal as we are filled with the grace of accepting their reality and loving them for what they are. Again this means letting go of the ways we want our life to be and believe it should be. We learn to surrender our ego to let God’s unconditional love seep through our soul and become its healing. This is called “redemption.”

Jesus is our Redeemer because he is the possibility of who we can become. Jesus is our Redeemer because he shows us the way. But most of all Jesus is our Redeemer because he took

ARCHIVES LENT

the pain and suffering that has accumulated as the human wound strikes out at one another, and began its healing. We call this “dying for our sins.” It is the beginning of Redemption for all creation. And it continues in our lives as God heals our pain, and binds our wound with the balm of God’s loving essence.

As we continue these weeks of Lent we must keep the dazzling image of Jesus before us. It is Jesus’ legacy to us, and the beacon of our possibility. It entices us beyond the numbness of what seems to be our normal lives and awakens us to the gift and responsibility of divine partnership in bringing healing into this world. For we too see ourselves mirrored in the Transfigured Jesus.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - STILLPOINT / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS - 4th Sunday of Lent - Cycle A The Man Born Blind (John 9:1-41)

“The man born blind” is meant to be a symbol of the blindness we all share as part of our human condition. – a spiritual blindness. His cure from blindness is called a “sign” in this Gospel. That means it is a physical occurrence that helps us become aware of our need “to see” on a spiritual level. “Seeing” is an act of awareness, it’s the ability to perceive ourselves as the “Beloved” children of God. The blindness of this man is an occasion for us to become aware of God’s grace, God’s love trying to break through our blindness.

Notice that the incident throws the Pharisees into confusion. Is Jesus a saint or a sinner? They want to believe that he is a sinner because he broke God’s rules and worked on the Sabbath. But his work results in a cure that only God could do. This causes confusion. Their way of “seeing” is in chaos, they can’t make sense out of what they are seeing. Their attempts to reduce God to simplistic “good and bad” categories isn’t working. But instead of dealing with it they want to blame Jesus – and the blind man, and even his parents. In their world of blame and judgment they need someone to attack for their own confusion. Jesus simply isn’t playing by their rules.

The rules are created by our ego which sees everything in terms of either/or, right/wrong, good/bad. This helps in making decisions because it creates choices. But the choices are often simplistic. For example, if you have an eight ounce glass of water filled half way, how would you describe it? Is it half full? Or is it half empty? Once you choose you can take this a step further. Are people who see it as half full optimists? And people who see it as half empty pessimists?

No matter which side you choose you’ve also chosen a form of blindness. The glass is actually BOTH half full and half empty. Look at it. It’s right there before your eyes, both half full and half empty. But our ego’s need to simplify it makes us blind to the reality. In our religious culture we’ve made thousands of judgments like this. We see the mind helpful because it uses rational thoughts, but the body is bad because it produces emotions which cloud our rational thinking. Actually our body has an instinctual type of awareness that is necessary for survival. We become half blind when we choose not to pay attention.

ARCHIVES LENT

And here's a mistake some spiritually oriented people make. They decide that the ego is bad because it over simplifies our reality. But the reality is that we need our ego to focus our energy and make temporary decisions. The problem is that our ego has taken over and pushed out wisdom. And when the ego gets full control it becomes self righteous, attached to externals and misses the inner reality of God's love working within us. We need to live from both ego AND soul / spirit. If we want to see in the light of Jesus we need to pay attention to both our ego/mind and our soul/spirit.

Now that you're paying attention to the way your mind works pay attention to what your mind is doing. It tries to cast the present moment in terms of what should be or could be. So – you're probably judging at this moment: "This is a waste;" "What's he talking about – it's not what I believe;" "This isn't the way I was brought up;" "I could be doing something else, somewhere else." This is just the way our mind works.

Unfortunately our mind is stuck in the past or the future and God is here right now. This is what Jesus wants us to "see." He is trying to get us to be present, right here, right now, without judgments. God cannot be confined to the categories of our mind. We can know God only through relationship, not through our thoughts. We'll never define God into our lives. But we can meet God – right here, right now.

Meeting God in the here and now is what the disciplines of Lent are about. Becoming aware of our woundedness helps us be aware of our need for God. Fasting clears our awareness. It's a form of detoxification. Almsgiving is an act of compassion in which we recognize our need for one another. And prayer is anything we do to open our lives to God's presence. It's a choice to live in relationship to God.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. – PATHWAYS / Stillpoint

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Notice that the incident throws the Pharisees into confusion. Is Jesus a saint or a sinner? They want to believe that he is a sinner because he broke God's rules and worked on the Sabbath. But his work results in a cure that only God could do. This causes confusion. Their way of "seeing" is in chaos, they can't make sense out of what they are seeing. Their attempts to reduce God to simplistic "good and bad" categories isn't working. But instead of dealing with it they want to

ARCHIVES LENT

blame Jesus – and the blind man, and even his parents. In their world of blame and judgment they need someone to attack for their own confusion. Jesus simply isn't playing by their rules.

Read this meditation below carefully several times:

You and I
are swimming like fish in the
the ocean of our nonconscious ideologies.

Did you catch the repetition of “the” at the end of the second line and the beginning of the third line? Many people miss this because our brains do not give us absolute reality; rather, they feed us an edited interpretation of absolute reality.

Now that you're paying attention to the way your mind works pay attention to what your mind is doing. It tries to cast the present moment in terms of what should be or could be. So you could be judging what you are reading in any number of ways: “This is a waste;” “What's he talking about – it's not what I believe;” “This isn't the way I was brought up;” “I could be doing something else, somewhere else.” This is just the way our mind works. We filter the reality of the present moment through our judgments.

Unfortunately our mind is our mind is constricted by these judgments. It's like we are looking at our life through a keyhole - with both eyes at the same time. This is what Jesus wants us to “see.” He is trying to get us to be present, right here, right now, without judgments. God cannot be confined to the categories of our mind. We can know God only through relationship, not through our thoughts. We'll never define God into our lives. But we can meet God – right here, right now. We being to make room for the reality of God by paying attention to this moment. We might be aware of the inspiration of this moment, an energy to live more freely and openly. The experience will be different for each one of us but Jesus *is* healing our blindness.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - STILLPOINT / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS - 5th Sunday of Lent - Cycle A
Lazarus is raised from the dead. (John 11:1-45)

The Gospel is the “greatest story every told” because it so totally engages the whole drama and promise of our lives. It ignites our imagination to conceive of our reality in richer colors and helps us become sensitive to the grand spectrum of God's presence in our life. It is the story of the triumph of love hidden even in the depths of catastrophe.

If, at times, the Gospels seem flat, could it be because we can't fathom the depth to which God has come into our lives? Can we really believe that God is here loving us when we feel so separate from God, from one another and even from our self. The good news of the Gospels is that God is not a sentimental, trivialized love, but a love in which the cross reveals God's vulnerability to our need.

In today's Gospel we are drawn into a story of God's presence in the most universal place of all. We find God wherever we find suffering. Suffering is everywhere, inside every group and religion. This means that no one group can take possession of God. There is no spiritual loyalty

ARCHIVES LENT

tests in Jesus' ministry. Not a single one of his healings or exorcisms depends on worthiness. Jesus responds with God's compassion whenever he meets someone in need.

In this Gospel Jesus enters the place of grief and death to reveal God's love. "When Jesus saw Mary weeping...he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." He enters but not without cost. This wrong is not banished by a transcendent word of power. God doesn't work by conquering. This wrong is transformed by Jesus inhabiting it. Seeing Mary weeping he begins the movement of divine consolation and compassion. He is troubled, even anguished by the grief death has caused. He joins them in their tears for the only way beyond death and grief is through it.

The fullness of life in Christ is not pain and suffering avoided or denied. It is pain and suffering transformed, as the cross itself reveals. Jesus on the cross identifies with the human problem, the darkness of our wounded lives. He refuses to stand outside of the human dilemma. On the cross evil is not overcome by attack or avoidance but by union with our Father.

We who are baptized into the mystery of Christ find that this is the revelation of how our wholeness is created by our Father. When we feel fear we must learn to "suffer" our actual fear, taste the nature of our anxiety, get a sense of its texture and style, its falsity and disguises. We have to admit that we don't want to lose something, and admit exactly what that something is. Is it our reputation, our comfort, our place among our friends, our control? When we enter the reality of our fear, our weakness, we will find healing. We will find the compassion and love of our Father who, like his Son, always responds to need. This puts our life in a completely different light.

The spiritual path does not bring about improvement or perfection. It brings about a maturity, a humanity, and a wisdom in loving and accepting love. Wisdom is about loving all of our life in its complexity and finding the freedom to respond to its circumstances with generosity and compassion. This kind of love must come from a source beyond our ego. This is why spirituality is about connection to God. Love is our basic reality because we are made in the image and likeness of God. Spirituality is about waking up to God's intimate presence in our lives.

The aim of connection to God is to become more human, not to arrive at some transcendent state in which the difficulties of being human are not present. Our ego, on the other hand, believes that only accumulated knowledge and success can bring us into God's Presence, as if God were an achievement, like scaling Mt. Everest. But connecting with God or living from within God's love is more a matter of letting go of our mind's judgmental nature and learning to receive God's love as the source of our living and loving. God is already here in our lives. We connect to God by waking up to what already is. This is what Jesus knew to be true about his life and revealed to be true about ours.

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ARCHIVES LENT

Lazarus is raised form the dead. - John 11:1-45

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In today’s Gospel we are drawn into a story of God’s presence in the most universal place of all. We find God wherever we find suffering. Suffering is everywhere, inside every group and religion. This means that no one group can take possession of God. There is no spiritual loyalty tests in Jesus’ ministry. Not a single one of his healings or exorcisms depends on worthiness. Jesus responds with God’s compassion whenever he meets someone in need. Our need is God's only criteria for his compassion.

In this Gospel Jesus enters the place of grief and death to reveal God’s love. “When Jesus saw Mary weeping...he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” He enters but not without cost. This wrong is not banished by a transcendent word of power. God doesn’t work by conquering. This wrong is transformed by Jesus inhabiting it. Seeing Mary weeping he begins the movement of divine consolation and compassion. He is troubled, even anguished by the grief death has caused. He joins them in their tears for the only way beyond death and grief is through it. as we walk the path of grief we learn the eternal meaning of our relationships. We experience the stubborn persistence of the bonds that connect us beyond the illusions of time and the exquisite wonder of the spiritual reality of those who seemed so wedded to their physical nature.

The fullness of life in Christ is not pain and suffering avoided or denied. It is pain and suffering transformed, as the cross itself reveals. Jesus on the cross identifies with the human problem, the darkness of our wounded lives. He refuses to stand outside of the human dilemma. On the cross evil is not overcome by attack or avoidance but by the eternally faithful presence of our Father.

We who are baptized into the mystery of Christ find that this is the revelation of how our wholeness is created by our Father. When we feel fear we must learn to “suffer” our actual fear, taste the nature of our anxiety, get a sense of its texture and style, its falsity and disguises. We have to admit that we don’t want to lose something, and admit exactly what that something is, be it our reputation, our comfort, our place among our friends, or our control? When we enter the reality of our fear and our weakness, we will find healing. We will find the compassion and love of our Father who, like his Son, always responds to need.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - STILLPOINT / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS

Passion Sunday: The Parable of the Cross of Christ

To love is to be vulnerable.

Every parent, every lover, every close friend knows the vulnerability of loss and grief that comes with loving.

To love is to be vulnerable. To love unconditionally, like God loves, is to be unconditionally vulnerable. And yet it is the vulnerability that creates the most intimate bonding in our relationships. A bonding that fuses us spiritually on a level so deep that we are most aware of the fusion when we've lost the physical dimension of our love. The physical loss is amplified by the vulnerability that makes us aware of the intensity of our bonding. In some ways we are closer spiritually than we were physically. And we feel the vulnerability far more.

On the cross of Christ we see, not a proof of God's love, but the consequence of God's love. God has chosen and continues to choose to create us. But the bonding this creates, the intensity and immensity of God's love for us, makes God vulnerable to our woundedness. To lose us is to lose God's own self. And that's not going to happen.

To love us is to be vulnerable. This is true even of God. We exist because God breathes God's own breath (see Genesis) as the source of our living. To condemn us, to overwhelm us with power, or to destroy us would also lessen the reality of God's unconditional love. God will not be diminished by our woundedness. And God will not be reduced by treating us with less than compassionate and healing love. The great spiritual problem through the ages is this, "How do you stand against hate without becoming hate yourself." How do you overcome someone who has harmed you without becoming just like them? How do you stand up to evil without doing evil?

On the cross of Christ we see God's heart made vulnerable to us. We see God's compassion and determination to meet us where we are, love us for who we are and to hold us internally close.

The essence of the wound that inflicts all of us is the illusion and belief that we are separate from God. This illusion makes us look to ourselves as the center of our lives, actions, security and possibilities. The fact is, God is the center; God loving us unconditionally and holding us in existence. God sees our destructiveness as a symptom of the illusion of separation. The way to heal us is to awaken us to the unconditional intimacy of God.

On the cross Jesus' human vulnerability to evil unites with ours to expose the incredible intimacy of God as the source and center of our existence. On the cross Jesus is thrust into the woundedness and the pain that we cannot avoid. On the cross Jesus does not overcome evil by attack or avoidance but by exposing our Father's heartfelt presence and compassion. Jesus absorbs evil into the heart of God and transforms it into life. Emptiness is filled, darkness burns with light. Separateness is no longer a barrier but a bonding.

ARCHIVES LENT

Every year at this time I recall the wisdom of St. Alphonsus Liguori the founder of the Redemptorists. He said: "When you look upon the cross of Christ do not dwell on the pain and suffering but on the love with which Christ died for us." This final week of Lent, this most holy week of our church year, invites us to gaze upon the cross so that our hearts will be softened, made vulnerable to God's softness, compassion and vulnerability to us. This final parable of death and new life is meant to expose all that needs to be healed within us, to create compassionate bonding with all that needs to be healed within our sisters and brothers, and in this bonding to know our God as the intimate source of all that is love and creates love. This is the love with which Christ gave himself for our sake.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - STILLPOINT / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS

Close your eyes and think of the majestic surprise your life is.

Ash Wednesday is an incredibly simple gesture that touches each person deeply / authentically in their own unique way. People come up simply as they are in their humanness.

There's nothing overtly much to gain or lose and so people come with honest, unadorned presence.

This is the heart of prayer.

PRAYER IS NOT PRIMARILY SAYING WORDS OR THINKING THOUGHTS. IT IS, RATHER, A STANCE. It's a way of living in the Presence, living in awareness of the Presence, and even of enjoying the Presence.

The full contemplative is not just aware of the Presence, but trusts, allows, and delights inside of an active and experienced union.

Contemplation – the prayer beyond words and ideas – is not explaining as much as continuing and receiving everything, and holding onto nothing.

It is refusing to judge too quickly and refining your own thoughts and feelings by calm observation and awareness over time – in the light of the Big Picture.

How do we find what is supposedly already there? How do we awaken our deepest and most profound selves, by praying and meditating? By more silence, solitude, and sacraments? Yes to all of the above, but the more important way is to live and fully accept our reality.

This solution sounds so simple and innocuous that most of us fabricate all kinds of religious trappings to avoid taking up our own incolorious, mundane, and ever-present cross.

It is a divine blessing to be engaged in the privilege of anointing these people, because there's a beauty that shines through.

I feel thankful but have no right to thank you – you didn't do this for me.

But it is still a sharing of a very deep reality, a moment of becoming spiritually more alive

Just to bask in this simple moment because it is a true moment

ARCHIVES LENT

Simple, true, without fantasies, hope or judgment
 People just being themselves

The point of the Lenten practice is to strip away everything and end up in a more honest presence to the True – become a bigger container / ego for the infinite reality

Not true information or thoughts

But a relationship to God that awakens us to the gift of love and the possibility of being loving as we are loved

You can tell if you've found a relationship with the True by the results in your life

You know you're on the right path if your capacity for holding paradox expands, your sense of humor broadens, your commitment to justice deepens / concretizes, your compassion for and protection of life grows, and your love of people transcends race, color, creed, tribe, religion, politics, and sexual preference.

INNER VIEWS

Ash Wednesday is an incredibly simple gesture that allows our deeply intuitive faith to express itself in a very concrete and sacramental way. People come up simply as they are. And in this they bring themselves as a blessing, quietly and truly expressing and sharing a sacred and personal truth. I am thankful to have the privilege of being part of this moment. It feeds my spirit.

The point of the Lenten practice is to strip away everything we rely on so that we end up in a more honest present to the True, to the reality of God, to the intimacy of God loving us into existence. This is meant to awaken us to relationship to Trinity that reveals within us the gift of Love and the possibility of being loving as we are loved. In the terms of spirituality we describe this as emptying and expanding the container that is our ego so that we are able to receive God more faithfully.

There's nothing overtly much to gain or lose in this simple gesture of receiving ashes and so people come with honest, unadorned presence. This is the heart of prayer. Prayer is not primarily saying words of thinking thoughts. Those are ways in which prayer is expressed. The essence of prayer is an opening of ourselves to Divine Presence. We chose to let God be part of our lives. This is a sacramental being in the moment. Prayer matures and ripens into trusting, allowing, delighting and giving ourselves as an expression of this Presence that we have consciously awakened to in our life.

This contemplative stance of prayer is not about explaining ourselves and our needs to God as much as containing and receiving everything, and holding onto nothing. It is refusing to judge too quickly. Over time we learn to refine our own thoughts and feelings by calm observation and awareness – in the light of a more inclusive sense of identity in relationship to God.

ARCHIVES LENT

Lent is about expanding ourselves to receive and serve Divine intimacy. This is why there is an emphasis on fasting, almsgiving and prayer. They are three dimensions of the same reality. Fasting helps us experience our emptiness and hunger for God. Almsgiving reminds us that everything worthwhile in our life is a gift, a grace which we can be gratefully aware. And prayer is simply being in and opening ourselves to Divine Presence. All three practices are about the reality and trueness of God in our lives. They are a way of detaching from our fear driven anxiety and receiving God as a gift – on God's terms.

You can tell if you've found a relationship with the Reality of Divine Presence by the results in your life. You know you're on the right path if your capacity for holding paradox expands, your sense of humor broadens, your commitment to justice concretizes, your compassion for and protection of all forms of life grows, and your love of people transcends the limiting judgments of race, color, creed, tribe, religion, politics, and sexual preference.

Everyone is called to be a mystic during Lent, to being open to mystery and the multilayered meaning of mythic images. We are being expanded through our intuition and creativity through the art and ritual of our tradition. These give the soul room to fashion a lovable and thoughtful human being out of us, one who can love with Divine commitment.

Ken Sedlak - Stillpoint / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS

Fasting from our blindness

Lent is about conversion and repentance, which means that we are supposed to change our attitude with regards to God. We are supposed to wake up to who God really is, not just who we expect God to be or have been taught that God is..

The way I see it, admittedly from outside, is that when a couple is dating, before they make the final and formal commitment of marriage, they find it easier to get along. Once they make the commitment of declaring their vows it becomes more difficult to get along. The reason is that before they seal their commitment with vows they are living with all the possibilities of what could be or should be in their relationship. If something in their relationship isn't going well they have the hope that "When we get married it will work out." They can deal with the present difficulty because they can hope in a future possibility of something better. They see their partner more as they want them to be than as they are.

But once they get married they no longer have a future of vague possibilities to bank on. Once they are married they have to deal with the reality of their relationship. They have to deal with the knots and rigidities within their personality and the shortcomings of their partner. If they do deal with the knots and shortcomings their love can mature and deepen because they are learning to love each other as they really are. They are living with the truth of who they are instead of the

ARCHIVES LENT

fantasies of who they dreamed one another should be. Real love is built on a clear and sober presence to the reality of the other person.

It's the same way in our relationship with God. We have fantasies about who we expect God to be. Lent is a time to let go of our fantasies about God and love God as God. Giving up our fantasies is far more difficult than giving up beer or pizza. We could begin with recognizing that God doesn't care what we give up or if we give up. We give up things for many reasons, all of which are our own reasons, not God's need. "Giving up" is not going to gain more of God's love for us. God loves us. That's God's choice, not ours. The only that we can give up that will make a difference to God is our limiting images of God.

We're not looking for more information about God or new insights. We're trying to learn and letting ourselves be taught to relate to God without expectations or thoughts. God is Love, the basic life giving energy of all creation. We are present to God by being present to creation in all of its chaotic complexity and elegant beauty.

God is simply "the True," the reality of all that is. And yet God is far more than cosmic energy. God is Love, a relationship, a compassionate and personal life-giving presence who loves us in our uniqueness. In other words God knows us and cares about us personally.

We cannot grasp God with our mind, whenever we try to grasp God we reduce God to thoughts or categories and end up relating to these rather than God. We can however be grasped by God. We can learn to let go and trust ourselves to Love. This is the real meaning of fasting and repentance. We fast from ourselves and turn to God.

In this context faith is an openness to Ultimate Mystery as the reality of all that is. Faith is a relationship long before we try to capture it in dogmas and images. We grow in faith by being dedicated to "the True" that is the foundation of all reality. To know "the True" we must give up our fantasies and ideas and wade into the Mystery of what is.

I'm afraid this is pretty abstract. We grow in the relationship by spending time in awareness of being present to God. This is the meaning of prayer, simply being with God.

May your Lent be awake to the blessing of Divine Presence.

INNER VIEWS

When you pray expect change

Words have abandoned me in prayer. As a Redemptorist community we get together twice a day to pray from the psalms in the "Liturgy of the Hours" . Most of the things that these prayers ask for don't mean much to me. I can't pray them with much conviction. I think they are meant to

ARCHIVES LENT

express a great variety of needs and in that way they connect us to our need for God.

Yet in my experience God doesn't come through for us on the level that these prayers express. God doesn't wipe out my enemies as these often ask. I think the point is to move beyond a literal recitation of our ego desires to a letting go of these desires and learn to trust deeply in God.

Here's how Richard Rohr describes it:

"Risk all for love, Jesus tells us, even your own life. Give that to me and let me save it. The healthy religious person is the one who allows God to do the saving, while I do my part to bring up the rear. It always feels like a loss of power and certitude at the beginning, which is why it is called faith, and why true Biblical faith is probably somewhat rare."

It does feel like a loss of power and certitude. And that loss is experienced as a loss of words in prayer. Prayer is about choosing to be present to God: at least from our point of view.

From God's point of view prayer is about waking up to God who is always present as the Source of our creation. God is always "saving us." We don't have to ask, we just need to learn to trust. And we learn to trust by praying and learning to let go of our desires and expectations to receive from God.

When we do this, when we "let go and let God" we are escorted into Mystery. That's when words fail. Words can't express the reality of what is happening. Words actually get in the way. Words reduce our prayer to the smallness of concepts. God's reality is always bigger than the words and concepts we use" and prayer is about the reality of who God is as Loving Presence and Source of all creation.

To tell the truth I didn't know I knew this when I started writing this. But in the writing God teaches me. I think this is part of the trusting that is at the heart of faith. We all need to find the ways our trust needs to express itself and let God grow it.

There's another dimension that I was alerted to in the Meditation Group that meets on Monday evenings. Part of being escorted into the Mystery of Divine Presence is learning to let go of what has happened so that we can be alert to what is happening. Every moment is a new, creative and surprising moment when we're dealing with God. What works in prayer at one moment can't be repeated in the next.

We've changed because of it and God is always dealing with us in the reality of who we are becoming. And we continue to become, to unfold through the process of relating to more and more of our life as well as the vast complexity of our experience. We meet God in the vastness of the Divine Mystery. Every moment is a time of passing through a new doorway, a new portal of reality. God works with us patiently and gently. Our development and becoming is subtle but constant. Every moment is a new moment asking us to respond in a new way.

Ken Sedlak - Stillpoint / PATHWAYS