

Ash Wednesday, 2021



While the classic disciplines of Lent prayer, fasting and alms giving offer us pathways to a deeper spirituality and deeper sense of social justice, they can easily get hijacked. In other words, we can crank up pray, fasting and charity without any cost or any real letting go or any real transformation of ourselves. And when we are not transformed, it is really hard to transform the world

without looking, as Jesus says, like a hypocrite. Hypocrites always want to change the world but never dare look inside as the starting point for fear they themselves will have to change. We can get to the end of the 40 days of Lent and congratulate ourselves for praying more, fasting more, and giving more to charity and place all three on the mantle like trophies of accomplishment. This will make the ego feel good about itself. But outside of giving up this or that for 40 days no real, interior transformation will take place, because the imperial ego will still be in charge. At the end of the 40 days, it will still be about me. Little, of anyone else's lives, will have changed for the better. This is what we call "cheap grace." Cheap grace stockpiles God's grace much like someone who collects antiques or rare stamps or books or trinkets or trophies. You can live without those as you can live without cheap grace. But real grace is what we can not live without. We are all living, although our egos don't like to admit it, by the grace of God. Grace is our lifeline to God without which we would die. It is similar to what Jesus says in the gospels when he says, "the branches cut off from the vine withers and dies."

In that first reading from the Prophet Joel the people really are about to die. They need God's grace. Joel tells them to come together in solemn assembly to call upon God and God's grace. Joel writes these words when the people are in the middle of a terrible crisis. Huge swarms of locusts have devoured their crops. Because of this, they do not have enough food to eat and there is not enough grain for anyone to make their grain offering to the Lord at the Temple. How will we please the Lord without our grain offering?

In the middle of that Biblical crisis—much like our pandemic crisis—Joel invites the people to live the crisis as an invitation to draw closer to God. He says, “forget the grain offering; instead offer your hearts to the Lord, the one who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relents from punishing.” So instead of an offering that comes from outside yourself—an offering the ego would love to display as a trophy so it can feel holy, spiritual and good about itself—offer yourself, your heart to the Lord, as the only thing the Lord ever wanted of you from the very first. Leave everything behind, come together, and call on the Lord. You grooms leave your room; you brides leave your canopy; you priests leave the altar, the young, the old, even children at the breast leave everything you are doing and call upon the Lord. Put the Lord first, call upon the Lord now, and there will be time afterwards to do all the things you thought were so important. Come now and come as you are, not as you should be, because you will never be as you should be.

Joel is saying, your grain offering, because of the locust swarming, cannot be offered. Some people cannot make it to church to receive the ashes this Ash Wednesday because of COVID; most of you were not able to receive palms last Palm Sunday for the same reason. History repeats itself, does it not? The Lord cares little about the ashes and the palms and even less about your clothing. Don't bother ripping open your clothing; instead, rip open your hearts. It's the only thing God every wanted of us anyway...our hearts.

Here's the thing about God's grace; it's free. Anything you think you are earning, deserving, owed, or entitled to is not God's grace. Those things are the working of an uninitiated ego. Remember, to be initiated means something first had to die in you. Only failure, desperation, disaster, shattered plans, sickness, or an encounter with death are strong enough to knock the ego off its pedestal and open us to God's grace and not cheap grace. I have to keep reminding myself, “Phil, you are not measured by the good you do but by the grace you accept.” Lent is not about collecting trophies, nor about collecting get-out-of-jail-free cards; all of that is cheap grace. Lent about living by God's grace, the only thing that can truly bring us from death to life, from ashes to resurrection.

I end with a quote that my ego hates but my soul loves. It's from the late Brennan Manning: “Your Father God loves you as you are, not as you should be. He loves you beyond fidelity and infidelity, beyond worthiness and unworthiness. He loves

you in the morning sun and the evening rain. He loves you equally in your state of grace and in your state of disgrace. He loves you without caution, regret, boundary, limit, breaking point. No matter what happens or what you do...He cannot stop loving you!"

Over the next 40 days, instead of trying to live without something, I'm going to try to live with that kind of grace. It's a lot harder, yet a lot more fulfilling, than giving up chocolate.

Fr. Phil