

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Mar 7th 2014

It is Lent again. And we are working on our repentance; fasting during Lent is a common activity. It helps keep us focused on our desire to access God's goodness and cleansing from our sins. But as I reflect on the lessons for today, I am reminded that fasting can get in the way of our honest desire to know God's ways. God doesn't want the outward behaviors that evidence our self-control and piety.

God wants what is in our hearts: the good, the bad, and the broken. Repentance without spiritual humility is just our own self-centered self-therapy that we trot out for God's approval. It isn't evidence of an honest desire to know the Lord and it doesn't liberate us from the pain of our own shame.

Isaiah really kicks our butts today. He tells us that engaging in trivial fasts that discomfort ourselves a bit while we continue to engage in the selfish pursuits that discomfort others a lot isn't penance for anything. Giving up a bit of food while we at the same time deprive others of their sustenance is not fasting. Sharing what we have with the hungry is the kind of fast that God finds acceptable. What that means to me is that giving up chocolate for Lent, while it will be a huge discomfort, is not going to bring me any closer to God from God's perspective. It will only give me the feeling that I can gain more self-control over myself and maybe lose a few pounds for the sake of vanity. It is just about me tinkering with my own pain/gain games.

Instead, I think the lessons are saying something else to me today. Cutting everything I eat in half and giving one half to the food pantry at my church will be spiritually cleansing. Clearing out my closet and giving half of what is in there to a women's half-way house will liberate me. I'm going to stop at inviting a homeless person to live in my basement, but I can definitely find some extra blankets around the house to drop off at a homeless shelter.

As I reflect further on the lessons for today, I am pretty sure that seeking repentance should not be about seeking assurance of release from the bondage of sin and wickedness. That release is a given in the goodness of God. Rather repentance should be about seeking healing of the wounds we inflict on our own spirits and those of others from the ways in which we live apart from God. Our sacrifice should be a humble heart that acknowledges and trusts the great compassion of God to reach out and heal us through Jesus. Jesus comes to us in our pain, in our shame, where we can't impress him with what we think are our strengths and our goodness. Jesus reaches out to us and calls us to follow him. Our healing occurs when we follow. Today I pray that Lent is for all of us a greater experience of the liberation of our sins through following Jesus.

Barbara Dilly - Creighton University Student