

## 02 March 2023—The First Sunday of Lent:

Let's begin our Lenten journey with an understanding of sin. Some seem more interested in others' faults: "their sins." 'If only *they* would clean up *their* lives the world would be swell.' Sin as someone else's problem and not a common human condition is spiritually unhealthy and unhelpful. We all share the dull commonality of sin.

Sin separates us from our true identity as mortal creatures loved into wholeness by a loving Creator. Sin alienates us from God, from others and from ourselves. We trade intimacy with God for estrangement, attempting to fill ourselves with what is contrary to God's love for us. God has given us the good earth, the happiness of relationships, the delight of many and varied enjoyments, but attempts to use them as substitutes for or apart from God cannot fill us beyond the moment, because by pursuing them apart from God we deny our own identity as mortals loved by God. God's desire is to be in complete relationship with each one whom God creates. You and I are created to be God's dwelling place.

Lent is for reaffirming and renewing our identity as creatures in whom God desires to and will dwell, entirely and eternally. We admit our false attempts at joy have produced measly results and at times wreckage and emptiness. Lent is not about sin but about sin's remedy; it is not about guilt but very much about being loved into wholeness.

Here is an analogy. Perhaps you have a closet or room that you periodically think, "I need to clean that out; maybe tomorrow." Lots of tomorrows follow. Lent reminds us we have had the same procrastinating paralysis about our spiritual life; it is time to open the door and take an honest look.

At home, when the closet door is opened, you first see dust, cobwebs, and bugs—hopefully dead. You see the jumble of cast-offs, anonymous boxes of who knows what. The closet's debris is repellant, a convenient excuse for more delay. One's spiritual closet can be much the same. Yet just as distasteful cobwebs and bugs cannot truly harm, neither can the creepy-crawlies, and rubble of the spiritual heart. They can be dealt with.

Having put aside hesitancy, you begin the cleanup. Have you ever found a box filled with useless items? You think, "Why did I keep this?" There are memories, resentments, wounds in our minds and hearts that are nothing but junk. Perhaps they provide a warped sense of security, help us play the victim, fuel our resentments, or simply feel 'normal.' Whyever, we have hoarded it, all needs to go.

Sometimes it seems we place the trash at the curb for pickup and it walks right back in. If so, take it right back out. Your spiritual garbage served some dark purpose, and it will want to reinsert itself. Keep giving it away to God for God's management. If it takes 10, 100, 1000, 10,000 times keep surrendering to God until the junk does not crawl back in.

Sometimes when cleaning actual closets we find lost, forgotten treasures: photographs, keepsakes, souvenirs. When you clean your soul's closet you will find treasures—forgotten, lost, unexpected. Lenten discipline is not deprivation or activity for its own sake. Lent helps us discover or re-discover what Jesus referred to as the pearl of great price. What God has in store for you is his priceless loving-kindness. The horde of God's loving-kindness is so close, already in you, but obscured, neglected, perhaps waiting amid the worthless ruins of sin.

You are blessed: the treasure is already in you, and you are never alone in finding it. God the Father loves you passionately and will guide you on your journey of discovery. God the Son our Lord Jesus is with you, at every breath to give sight and healing. God the Holy Spirit gives you discernment and strength at every turn. God's longing is for you, for your wholeness and your joy.

Healing, joy, and eternal communion with God is the treasure: it is not something we possess; we are possessed by it, filled with the divine Life of God. We claim this audacious fact each Sunday in a way an outsider might think odd. We reaffirm our identity as divinely shaped dwelling places for God in the Confession of Sin. We surrender the wreckage of sin so, "...that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways."

May you keep a holy Lent: open wide the doors of your soul's junk room; surrender to God every useless bit of spiritual rubbish. Keep on taking it to the curb for God's management. With God's help, find the spiritual treasure God gives you. God loves you madly. God longs to know you eternally and to be known by you perfectly. Holy God, help us delight in your will and walk in your ways. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us. Amen.