

"Practices That Nurture Growth"

Scripture Passages: 1) **Psalm 51**
2) **Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**
3) **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

Pippin: As many of you know we have a dog named Pippin. He is about 110 ten pounds and extremely strong. Most of the time, he minds our commands. Every now and then, however, he will just decide to take off. He is so strong and so fast that it is rare to catch him or stop him when he decides to take a run through the neighborhood.

This time of year he seems to be particularly prone to frolicking. I think the smells right now are particularly strong as animals are coming out of their winter slumber and mating season is upon us. Those smells are so tempting that Pippin can't control himself. He has to chase down those smells.

Typically he is gone for half hour to an hour. He always comes back. When he returns he is completely repentant. He is bashful. His head is down and droopy. He knows he is in trouble, but the temptation of the smells greatly outweigh the trouble or the knowledge that he let us down.

Ash Wednesday: Ash Wednesday is our opportunity to show up at the door of God with our head down, aware that we have given into temptation, that we have strayed from the path, that we have gone our own way, that we have thrown God's law to the wind. Ash Wednesday is an opportunity for us to begin again, to make a new start on our journey of faith, to recommit ourselves to following the Jesus' way. Ash Wednesday represents a tipping moment, will we chase after those enticing smells of the world or will we chase after God? This is a moment for us to consider which way we will tip!

Psalm 51 and Joel 2: In Psalm 51, King David, after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his affair with Bathsheba and his killing of her husband wrote, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Eugene Peterson translates that verse, "Going through the motions doesn't please you, and a flawless performance is nothing to you. I learned God-worship when my pride was shattered. Heart shattered lives ready for love don't for a moment escape God's notice."

Tonight can we admit our brokenness? Tonight can we admit our need for God's grace and forgiveness? Tonight can we forget the façade that we are perfect? Tonight can we drop the masks we hide behind so that the world thinks we are so together? Tonight can we be ourselves before God? Tonight can we let God love us just as we are?

We know almost nothing about the prophet Joel except that he was attempting to call the people of Israel back from there run through the neighborhood, their run through the culture. The prophet wrote, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing." Peterson translates that verse, "But there's also this, it's not too late—God's personal Message! – Come back to me and really mean it! Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins! Change your life, not just your clothes. Come back to God, your God."

Tonight God wants to know whether we are ready to change our lives or just our clothes? Tonight as we begin this journey toward Easter that we call Lent are we ready to change our

lives or will we just keep changing our clothes so that we look good on the outside, but inside nothing is different? Tonight what will we choose?

Help for the Journey: If we are at a place where we feel ready to change our lives rather than just our clothes. If we are at a place where we desire more than anything to move closer to God, then what can we do to help us make that dramatic kind of shift in how we live? Listen as Jesus gives us advice.

Read Matthew 6:1-21 (*The Message*)

Alms: Jesus mentions four disciplines that can help us keep focused on our relationship with God rather than always running after the latest smell or the newest fad. The first is often called alms. Alms equates to simply helping people out. Helping people in need, coming alongside someone else and journeying with them in the midst of their struggles provides an avenue for us to refocus our attention from self to the other, from self to the act of loving. As Jesus points out a critical aspect to this act of alms is our motivation. Do we help people because of what we get out of it or do we help people as a humble response to the grace of God that has been poured into our own lives? This Lent helping others is one discipline that will refocus our attention on God.

Prayer: A second discipline is prayer. Prayer is simply taking time to be with alone with God. Our lives are jam packed. We tend to run around like chickens with our heads cut off, or Pippin chasing the latest and greatest smell. When we live that way, we miss God. When we live that way we are blind to God's activity all around us, we are deaf to God's voice speaking to us. Prayer is the antidote. Prayer changes our focus back to God. This Lent prayer is one discipline that will redirect our attention to God.

Fasting: A third discipline is fasting. Fasting is giving up something we crave. It can be food, alcohol, television, texting, the internet, mystery novels, committee meetings, sweets, junk food, your favorite radio station, your favorite style of music, a person. It can be anything. We crave all kinds of things and people.

So why would we do that? Why would we give up what we crave? Because when we crave something it pulls our attention away from God. So if we give up that which we crave, then when that craving comes upon us we can use that craving as a reminder to change our focus to God instead of what we crave. Fasting is another discipline that has the potential for redirecting our attention to God.

Giving Things Away: The final discipline that Jesus encourages us to adopt is the discipline of giving things away. Our lives are cluttered with belongings. Often times our lives are consumed as we try to take care of all our stuff. By giving things away it sets us free to focus more on our relationship with God. In his book, *The Good and Beautiful Life*, James Bryan Smith encourages the reader to develop a discipline of giving something away each day or once a week. He encourages the reader to give away something that matters not just our junk, but rather something that we have attachments to. As Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Giving things away is another discipline that has the potential for setting us free, so that we can focus more fully on our relationship to God.

Conclusion: Lent is a time to return to God from all our wandering. Lent is a time set aside for the changing of our lives, not just our clothes. Of course changing our lives is not easy it takes commitment, it takes awareness, it takes desire, it takes resolve. Adopting the practice of a spiritual discipline such as caring for another person, or prayer, or fasting, or giving things away can help us focus giving us a simple and yet meaningful way to change our lives.

Tonight as we come to our Lord's Table about to begin our Lenten journey let us picture ourselves standing at the very door of God's house. (Close Eyes and Picture) Will we choose to

enter, or will we run back out chasing down the smells of our world? If we choose to enter what will be our posture? Will we enter filled with pride and wearing the masks of this life, or will we enter with broken and contrite hearts ready to give ourselves to transformation. How will each of us choose to begin our journey toward Easter? Let us give ourselves to that question as we come to the Table of Grace. Amen.