

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Lent

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, and was the beginning of our celebration of Lent. By the way, on this frigid weekend, you'll be happy to know that the word Lent actually comes from the old English word for "Spring" – so Spring is on its way. Now, during Lent we all know that we have a period of 40 days to prepare us for Easter. But, what you may not know, is that Lent itself has two overarching themes. The first half of Lent focuses on compunction, which is a fancy word for remorse, or sorrow for our sins. Compunction is related to the word "puncture". And just like a tire punctured by a nail deflates, so Lent is meant to help us deflate our often over-inflated egos. It's not a news flash – but, we're prone to selfishness and lots of other forms of sin. And so, Lent is meant to slow us down, and help us realize that we're all sinners. And that's important. Because if we don't admit that we're a sinner, than how can we admit that we need a Savior to save us from our sins? The thing is because we keep ourselves so busy and distracted with life and all its demands, most of us try lots of ways to manage our sins and cope with the guilt those sins really do bring. And so, when we pause long enough to admit that we're a sinner, we then find that we have two options:

1) to feel sorrow in our hearts for our sins, or 2) to not let this realization move from our head to our heart and just continue on our merry way.

Compunction is what that first option is all about. When we realize how our sins really do hurt others, God, and even ourselves, guilt for what we've done should creep in. Now, most of us think that guilt is something to avoid at all costs. But actually guilt can be a good thing. Guilt, speaking to us from our conscience, says, "I've done something wrong. That's not good." Shame, on the other hand, is never good. It says, "I've done something wrong. I'm not good." So avoid shame, but acknowledge guilt. Take the following example to understand guilt a little better. When you get a cut, you get the stinging or tingly feeling that's your body's way of saying, "If you don't do something, it's going to get infected." Similarly, guilt is our conscience's way of saying, "You've got to do something about this sin thing."

Now, when it comes to that "sin thing", we might try a number of ways as I said to manage or cope with it. We might try to sweep our sins under the carpet by rationalizing them as no big deal. We might try to normalize them by saying, "everyone's doing it." Or, we might try to keep ourselves so busy that we don't even know they're there anymore. But, I'm here to say that God alone can forgive your sins. Let me say that again – only God can our forgive sins. And the way we experience His mercy is by remorse for our sins, and then repenting of them by asking God to forgive us – above all in the sacrament of Reconciliation. This is the way we personally experience God's mercy upon us individually. And, it's what the first part of Lent is about.

However, Lent is not merely about me, myself, and I. It's not a solitary, isolated journey where we go into a cave of sadness and sacrifice for 40 days. Because, the second part of Lent, must flow forth from the first part. If, in a word, the first part of Lent was about compunction, the second half of Lent is all about conversion – meaning turning away from our sins and turning back to God. Now, we can rate our conversion, or our turning back to God, based on the degree that we're living our lives as disciples of Jesus. And Jesus, in order to help His disciples know objectively how they're doing in living as His disciples, gives them plenty of guidance in His preaching. For example in Matthew 25, we hear Jesus proclaim that when we do certain things for the least of our brothers and sisters, we actually do them for God! The Church has taken this teaching of Jesus and compiled it into a list we call the Corporal Works of Mercy. How many of you have heard of the Corporal Works of Mercy? I'll list them for you: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. In many ways, all of these charitable actions are linked together with the noble Lenten practice of giving alms to the poor. But Jesus says, when we do these things for the least among us, we actually do them for Him!

Lent, then, is about taking the mercy that is lavished upon us by our merciful Father, who forgives us the debt of our sins, and then extending that mercy to others. And what a perfect way to spread that mercy to others than through the Corporal Works of Mercy! To top it all off, this Lent occurs during the Jubilee Year of Mercy. And Pope Francis himself, in his letter announcing this year, wrote that it was his burning desire that, during this Jubilee, Christians might reflect more on these Works of Mercy in order to more fully live them out.

So, I'd like to give you a homework assignment as we begin Lent. And you have roughly 40 days or so to carry it out. First, let God lavish His mercy upon you personally through the forgiveness of sins. And then, second, take that mercy shown to you and show it to the less fortunate. Pick one of the Corporal Works of Mercy – you choose. Imagine if this Lent everyone in the whole Church not only experienced God's divine mercy personally, but then shared His mercy with the world! Talk about compunction leading to conversion! God bless you.