

Ash Wednesday
Church of the Resurrection

You might be surprised that the public library in downtown Salt Lake has a pretty decent assortment of devotional resources. From a book on their shelf years ago I found a prayer that has become a favorite of mine. In this prayer is definition of sin, an acknowledgment of God's place in our lives, and a simple yet elegant invitation to a Holy Lent.

**Lord, light a candle within my heart
that I may see what lies therein
& sweep the rubbish from your dwelling place.**

Last Sunday's gospel lesson, I based on the Transfiguration, invited us to gaze for a moment at **God**, as **God** really is. Full of glory. Overwhelming. Mysterious. Present. Three days later, on this first day of Lent, **we** are now called to get a glimpse of our selves as **we** really are.

We have become a list-making people, so on Ash Wednesday, we begin to make our annual list of sins. Our recitation of offenses can be compelling, sometimes humorous and usually tedious. I hate to admit it, but my list is not even very creative.

The pitiful part of listing these offenses is that adding your list to mine and our lists to those of each person we know, our lists don't begin to be exhaustive. If sin is a condition which distorts God's love freely offered; if sin is placing someone or something in God's rightful place in our lives and not the breaking of rules, then the possible permutations of sin are infinite. We have come up with so many ways to block God's love in our life; so many ways to keep God's love from the lives of those around us.

The purpose of this self-examination is not to be impressed with or surprised by our sins, or to get stuck in delicious self-loathing. We already know ourselves fairly well. The purpose of this self-examination **is to know ourselves as God knows us**. You see, the person you come to understand more clearly during Lent is the person God knows **even more** intimately and loves **even more** deeply than you can imagine. The person you uncover upon closer self-examination is exactly the person for whom Jesus died. The person you are, and have been, and will be, is a person God loves.

Listing our offenses doesn't make us better people. No one gets more points for uncovering the most sin. But it is helpful to understand how those things we do and those things we don't do, our destructive attachments, clutter up our relationships with each other and our relationship with God.

Once we see ourselves as *God sees us*, as those who have been brought into right relationship with God through Christ, our focus changes. Our focus is no longer our sin, or our *selves* but the gift of new life in Christ. The sins which we have named and for which we have been forgiven, are no longer obstacles to an intimate relationship with God and salvation. For God tells us time and time again that God loves us no matter what. That there is nothing we can do that can keep God from loving us.

If our sinfulness remains the focus of this Lenten season, and if we hold on to our personal favorite sins, they **will** become obstacles to new and holy life in Christ. Once we have identified the ways in which we place barriers to God's love, we can begin to remove them from that central place in our lives where God himself wishes to dwell.

Therein lies the challenge of a holy Lent. Removing the barriers to God's love, sweeping the rubbish from our lives, clearing the space God so wants to inhabit requires intentionality and hard work. That is why we are gathered here this evening: to hear that we are in need of God's love, to listen with the ears of our hearts to God's words of love, and to support each other in making space in our lives to receive and respond to God's love.

The traditional Lenten disciplines of self-denial, alms-giving, study and prayer are not obligations. They're not tests to measure one's commitment, but tools to shift attention away from our selves and our sin toward that holy life to which God is continually calling us. The disciplines of study and silence provide us with the light needed to illumine the dark places in our lives, and prayer grounds us as we open our hearts to make room in our lives for the One who knows us and loves us best

This Lent let us come to know ourselves as God knows us -- as *exactly* who we are: his beloved, his forgiven people. Let's intentionally make room in our lives and in our hearts for God --- the one who knows and loves us best.

Let us pray.

**Lord, light a candle within my heart
that I may see what lies therein
and sweep the rubbish from your dwelling place. Amen.**