

The Church didn't place Ash Wednesday right around the time most people forget about their New Year's resolutions, we just got lucky that way. For the vast majority of people who make them, New Year's resolutions don't amount to much. And most people know this, including the resolution-makers. No one is surprised when the gyms fill up in January, but they're back to the status quo before February is over.

So why do we persist in making these resolutions? Perhaps because they are based on a premise we want to be true: that we can improve ourselves, by ourselves, and these efforts will make our lives better if we just try hard enough. And our culture reinforces this belief, teaching individualism and secularism, and thereby setting us up to become life-long customers of all manner of products and services, some of which are labeled as "self-help," and all of which promise to make our lives better.

How's that working out for you? Maybe you found something that truly helps a specific aspect of your life, and if so, that's great. But nothing you can buy will satisfy your deepest longings or put your deepest fears to rest.

Are you open to trying something different, even if it doesn't come with slick marketing? Even if it involves some hard truths?

What I'm talking about is a different way of life, based on different premises and seeking different goals. One of those premises comes into focus today, namely, our own limitations. The imposition of ashes we are about to engage in reminds us of our chief limitation: our mortality. The prayers surrounding that ritual remind us of others: we are not only mortal, we are sinful, wounded, vulnerable, and fallible. We are reminded of the uncomfortable truths that we need help, and that our own efforts, alone, are not sufficient to meet that need, let alone take us to the heights of perfection.

However, the ritual also suggests the remedy to these limitations. The ashes come in the shape of a cross, another symbol of death, but to Christians, also a symbol of God's love for us, God's determination to forgive us for all our sins, God's triumph over death, and God's plan to bring us all into life everlasting. Just as God used an instrument of judgment and punishment to give us forgiveness; just as God used an instrument of death, and death itself, to destroy death and give us life; so too can God use our sins and brokenness to heal us, and the world around us.

The form and the setting of the ritual show us how we can receive these gifts. The corporate, collective form of our prayers and of our motion to the altar rail reminds us that we can't be Christians by ourselves; we need the support, encouragement, and prayers of our fellow Christians to make progress in our growth into the full stature of Christ. If they are to have any lasting effect, our efforts must be concerted and unified in the one Christ who gave, and gives, himself for us.

Now we are also reminded of a more subtle, and for some, a harder, truth: the efforts we do make are not for our own benefit. Not strictly our own, anyway. Jesus speaks directly to this truth in today's Gospel, contrasting those who engage in the efforts of repentance with selfish intentions with those who do them in truly devotional

altruism. Today the Church calls us to self-examination, not self-help. The forgiveness we enjoy isn't just to make us feel better, but to prepare us to live better lives, serving Christ in others.

So yes, do fast, pray, and give, and yes, these efforts will yield spiritual rewards, taking you closer to God now as well as storing up treasures in heaven. But do these things in the same corporate-minded spirit of devotion that we practice in church, that is, with an awareness of our connection to our neighbors, and our need for one another. God made us this way, and though we are sometimes told otherwise, we can't overcome or improve upon the work of God. God loves all of us so very much and since God made us in God's image, love for humanity is in our very essence.

The dean of my seminary observes that this year, the church got lucky with another calendar coincidence, the overlap of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. He writes, "Love and Lent are good bedfellows. The obligation of living and life is love. The challenge of love is sin. We know we are called to live lives honoring others; but we find it too easy to allow selfishness and brokenness to disrupt our obligations to others. The work of Lent is learning how to love."*

Learning how to love is a better goal than any New Year's resolution I've ever heard of, and fortunately, we have more powerful assistance than any instructor, personal trainer, or gym buddy. When love is our goal, God gives us all we need to succeed, and so much more, through the church, each other, and nature. All of us need all these things, and since God made us that way, it's nothing to be ashamed of. So I pray you will have a blessed journey of faith and love this Lent, and all your lives, and that you will embrace not only your loved ones, but also the source of all love, who forgives all our sins, reconciles us, and makes us whole, the one who is love.

*<https://vts.edu/deans-commentary/repent-on-valentines-day/>