

## Boot Camp or Invitation to Welcome Love?

I took my Catholic faith very seriously as a child and when Lent came around it felt like a boot camp to try to make me presentable to God. I tried very hard. I really did but I could never measure up to what I thought was expected no matter how hard I tried. It started with the prayer for the distribution of ashes "Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust you shall return." Why would God bother with me the way I was? Dust wasn't worth anything so I must not be either—but I could try—and try I did. I kept all the rules—no meat on Wednesdays or Fridays and gave up candy, went to Stations of the Cross, and said extra prayers. Somehow it was never enough. I know now that God's love is a gift that is freely given, but then I was sure that I could and had to earn it. What all my performing did was only make me scrupulous.

By the time I was a young adult who was obliged to both fast and abstain, I had gotten pretty good at keeping and rationalizing ways to keep the rules. If the intake of food at breakfast and lunch was not to equal the amount of dinner, the solution was easy—just eat a very big dinner. My roommate and I did exactly that and savored evening meals that lasted for hours. It was the similar kind of thinking we exercised with the Communion fast which was set for midnight, but since we had heard that actual midnight was 12:37 am at the prime meridian we could eat and drink until then. We got the letter, but definitely not the spirit of the rule. I hate to admit that I carried that image of God into most of my adult life.

Surely God wept at my misunderstanding of how much I am cherished and loved not, because I am "good" but because God is good. "We love because God first loved us." (1 John 4:19) And love and grace always prevail—even in my approach to Lent. I now focus on the "receive the Good News" part of the prayer when ashes are distributed. And I now know that the good news is that God loves me and that love can overflow and extend to others through me.

It might be the same 40 days on the calendar, but it is now totally different for me and I'm guessing, for many others—no rule-bending or "measuring up;" instead it's an invitation to welcome and receive and share God's love. The focus shifts from "giving up"

to "letting in," And that "letting in" changes us. We long for time alone with God in prayer. We are more attuned to the cries of the poor, the marginalized, the immigrant, the refugee, the sick, the lonely, the imprisoned—even our enemies. We are different people on Easter than we were on Ash Wednesday and that change can continue so that even Jesus' messages we tend to recoil from becoming something we can embrace because we live in the reality of being loved by God.

Take this one for example: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies it produces much fruit." (John 12:24) Our initial instinct says that's great for wheat, but not so inviting when it comes to humans. We have a tendency to balk at even the idea of this. Our culture is focused on living healthier, living more comfortably, living longer. And even though "death" is a certainty, we balk at talking about it, planning for it, accepting it. Even our words on the obituary page reveal that struggle. People "pass away" and "leave us."

Acceptance of God's love opens us to say "Yes" to invitations to choose the dyings we would ordinarily run away from because of that love. These choices are not demands but responses to love, and though difficult, we find that we wouldn't want it any other way. They change even our daytime routines. Instead of waking up and immediately turning on the TV and catching up on the latest news or grabbing our cell phones to check emails and Facebook, that time is now our quiet rendezvous with God. We may not like to be around sick people. It makes us queasy. But we put that aside and visit. It's God who loves us in that bed and we cannot turn away. Like a pebble thrown into a pond these choices ripple out. Slowly we see a pattern of small dyings and risings and the love and grace that enable us to embrace them. And we are much less afraid to say "Yes" to God even when the future looks uncertain for we are held in love.

So it's good-bye gloomy faces and rigid Lents of our youth. Welcome the love that is beyond imaginings. Death never has the last word. Resurrection—new life and love always follow!

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

John 12:24



Pope Francis condemned power struggles in daily life, stressed that appearance is not as important as God and urged Catholics not to be obsessed by possessions on Ash Wednesday.

The pope said that Lent, when the faithful are called to fast, pray and give alms to the needy, is meant to wake up Christians and help them see that God can give them the strength to change their lives and their surroundings.