

Ash Wednesday, 2013

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I have found that this sacred space, this place of St. Augustine's in-the-woods, and this faith community grow on you pretty quickly! At least, that's what I found – and I know I'm not alone. It very quickly becomes a familiar place and space and community.

And it's also easy – if you hang around here for even a little while, to start seeing unfamiliar faces as friendly, then familiar.

Yet it's also true there are times when we come here when the familiarity and the comfort can't pierce the outer shell that we have constructed to protect ourselves from the world in which we live – the world outside this place..

That world proclaims with regularity a hearty bonhomme and friendliness that's really only skin deep and waits, poised over us, for a jaded glimpse into the inner struggles that make up ours - and every other human being's - lives. "Access Hollywood", "Entertainment Tonight", what some famous person got a speeding ticket, who some other famous person is – maybe! – sleeping with - "enquiring minds want to know"....everything. And this is not just true for famous people, but for everyone – that, in part, is what gossip is about.

Self-revelation is a dangerous business out there in the world because it functions for the audience like a drug for an addict: first there's that emotional feeding-frenzy; and then, when boredom or satiation sets in, the object of attention is discarded - no matter what damage may have been done to them by this intense, prurient glare.

And so we build shells around ourselves for our own protection.

The problem for all of us is that when we come to this space - and especially on this day and in this season - it can be really difficult to let down the barriers, and lay before God the inner struggles that all of us have: There are the secret sins and the missed opportunities, the regret over damaged or destroyed relationships, the pain of loss. For some there's self-hatred, for others insecurity. There's anger, too, and doubt, and - occasionally, perhaps - an emptiness where we had hoped we would find God.

We come here, in other words, as people wounded, in some fashion, by life and by each other.

Not everyone knows - or is willing to acknowledge - that woundedness. Yet here we are - and that says something.

There's an old saying: "religion is for those trying to stay out of hell, spirituality is for those who've been there." But I don't think that's not quite right – because we've all been to hell. So perhaps it's better re-phrased this way:

“Religiosity is for those who don't want to admit to themselves and each other that they've been to hell; true religion is for those who recognize that an authentic community of faith can help

them heal when they get back.”

The invitation of Lent is to let go of the fear, the doubt, the sorrow, the regret, the anger - or, at least, to set them aside for a season with intentionality - and explore what it might mean to enter into a community that looks to a wounded healer for its life.

Again this year we have an opportunity to be that community where we can help heal each other when we get back.

Of course, we don't have it down pat! No community could claim that, except, of course, the Great Cloud of Witnesses mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews. We don't have it perfected. But we *are* trying to live in a way that helps that community to come into being, here, now - we are seeking, with each other's help, to bring our own woundedness into this place and lay it on God's altar.

That's what marks out genuine religious communities from so many others, who might have many of the same markers of identity but ultimately lack one thing: this is a spiritual community, which requires a different way of living together: one that asks of each of us a level of openness and trust that will be hard for all of us, one seldom attempted elsewhere.

But if it were easy would it be worth having? Would it have meaning if it required no effort? I very much doubt it.

So how can we help to create a community of openness and trust, or, at least, bring it further out from the shadows? Well, a great place to start is that we simply treat others as we hear Jesus promising us that we will be treated by God: with compassion and forgiveness, with joy at the return of one thought lost, with quiet celebration and love.

That will require some self-reflection on our part, but as Socrates has well said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

Genuine self-reflection can only lead to one place: humility. If we can't go there then the practice of our faith will simply be the religiosity of those who are unwilling to admit that they have journeyed to hell, and who thus consider themselves better than those who freely admit the heat and burns of that journey without making any judgement on others.

So use this journey to reflect, to let go, to be open to the healing grace of God. Use it as a vehicle to journey into authentic Community. Use it, in other words, to get ready for the greatest, most blessed day in creation that we will reach at its end.

May we do so together.        Amen.