

Last Sunday After Epiphany 2023

In the opening collect, we prayed to be strengthened in order to bear our cross.

What does it mean to *bear our cross*?

Why not ask for the strength to cast off our crosses?

Are Christians pessimists?

Masochists, even?

Well, some are, but spiritual self torture is not advised by the gospel.

We believe, furthermore, that the world is an emanation from God, full of God's purpose, which is not pessimistic at all.

We are, however, realists.

I keep coming back to the metaphor of boot camp.

The soldier does not expect boot camp to be like a spa, but knows that she is being trained for something meaningful, that the process is changing her.

She is not only building her own abilities, but, perhaps even more significantly, she is building strong bonds of trust with others.

So we are not called to be masochists or pessimists.

Neither are we hedonists.

We are not averse to pleasure—we do not think that pleasure is evil—but we also do not think that it is the purpose of our existence.

For us, life is a journey of growth.

In taking up this journey, we go through many psychological and spiritual stages.

As babies, we do not recognize the difference between our own egos and those of others.

Our individual needs are all there is and when they are not met, we respond, sometimes
loudly.

Our primary motivation is our immediate comfort.

As we grow, we start to separate, and that process is initiated in part by being denied
some of what we want.

We learn, in other words, that there is someone else out there who has the power to say
no.

We see that, even at this early stage, our growth is already tied to denial of our ego.

As we enter childhood, we learn more about the conflicting needs of others.

We are still motivated primarily by our own needs, but we realize we must learn to
negotiate with others to get those needs met.

We try out different approaches

“Mom, can I have a Nintendo Switch?”

“No.”

“Dad, can I have a Nintendo Switch?”

“Did you ask your mom?”

We are aware that others have needs, but spend little time thinking about them.

Narcissists get stuck here.

They become charming manipulators who do not consider the needs of others.

As we reach our teenage years, we begin to individuate more, to develop not only needs that differ from our parents’ needs, but our own ideas.

We begin to disagree, to develop the dismissive eye roll.

With individuation comes concern about fitting in, about our place in the larger society.

Those who get stuck here remain tribal.

They see the world in terms of homogeneous groups of one sort or another.

This is the tribalism and resentment that we see so much of today—group A hurt group

B.

Whether it is racial, regional, or political, the motivation is the same—maintenance of an imagined community.

And, of course, each imagined community is assigned a degree of good or bad.

I say imagined because there are actually as many differences within these groups as among them.

I had a friend, Naseem, born in Daytona, whose father explained his every behavior in terms of being born in India.

Then his sister arrived and said, “Don’t believe him, Naseem. We think he’s crazy, too.”

We share much less in common with those in our imagined groups than we, well, than we imagine.

As we continue into our adult life, we test out our abilities even more.

How far can we go?

What can we accomplish?

What will be the means of our survival?

We are establishing ourselves in the world and can be very competitive.

How will we relate to others, many of whom are also testing and seeking?

Some get stuck here.

Their motivation becomes superiority.

Whatever you have, they have something better.

Whatever you do, they have done something more impressive (even though you may not have done it to impress people).

As our career takes us to retirement, if we mature, we cast a wider gaze, beyond our egos and its accomplishments.

We look back and realize that society and the market are not God and our most important goals here are not determined by them.

We understand, in other words, that our most meaningful gifts are not often valued by society.

At this point, we individuate not only from others, but from society itself.

We turn to God, not the God of ego (in which I am God) or the God of group identity (my God vs. your God), but the universal God.

As members of the body of Christ, we belong to something much larger than our society.

We begin to measure ourselves more in terms of what kind of relationships we have.

We realize that no amount of ego fulfillment, no amount of imagined group belonging, no amount of worldly success will cure loneliness.

We identify with and see the value of others in all their various weirdnesses.

We view them, in other words, not in terms of the importance of group adherence and fitting in, as we did when we were teenagers, or in terms of how great their social achievements may be.

We view them, if we are in fact mature, in terms of their unique spiritual gifts.

We identify with their struggles, having had plenty of our own.

We seek to be good members of the body and to invite in others who wish to enter into that path of growth, no matter where they are along the way.

We grow, in other words, until all our other motivations fall away, leaving one primary motivation, which is love, which is God.

Some never make it to this level of hard-won maturity, and when we speak from one level of spiritual maturity to another, it does not translate well. If we speak to a narcissist, for example, it is seen in terms of how it can be used for his advantage.

If we speak with a tribalist, it all gets morphed into which tribe is better and what resentments are to be nursed.

Those who make it to the point that their every motivation is love are truly able to see everyone as their brothers and sisters, no matter where they are on their journey, but they know that that love will not necessarily be reciprocated.

We must temper our trust accordingly.

In the earlier stages, if we are growing, we are not utterly blind to what is ahead.

There are moments on the mountaintop when we can see clearly the road to God.

We may be able to chart a path that avoids the desert and the quicksand, but we do not get to stay on the mountaintop or to fly over the challenges.

We must go back down and go through them to mature fully.

I know of no other way.

Moses came down.

Jesus came down, although Peter, James, and John wanted to build dwellings there.

We come back down and make our way among the challenges and trials, just as Jesus
faced his own.

This is how we bear our cross.

Through challenges, we grow.

We Christians know that we need not look for challenges.

Challenges find us.

We are surrounded by them.

The church strives to be a place where we get glimpses of something greater, where we
can see the path to God.

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent.

In choosing a Lenten practice, I hope you will not seek challenges for the sake of
challenges, but will find something meaningful, something that encourages you to
grow.

Torturing oneself is easy.

Anyone can lie on a bed of nails.

What we seek is not mortification, but wisdom.

Lent is a time of letting go of those things that hold us back from God, that keep us in our current level of spiritual growth.

If you do not know what holds you back, then a meaningful practice might be simply to use Lent as a time of reflection to find out.

Whatever you choose as your Lenten practice, I wish us all a meaningful Lent, [but before that, we will celebrate the very thing to which Lent leads.

We will celebrate our community of love and friendship formed in God, first with a Eucharist, and then [tomorrow] with the gala.]