

I'd like to begin by issuing a retraction from all of my previous Ash Wednesday homilies.

Actually, it's more of a half-retraction. I think I got the message right but my verbiage might have might have been a little, well preacher-ish.

Here's the retraction: I've said for years that God does not care whether you give up chocolate for lent. Or for that matter wine or French fries or Facebook or whatever other deprivations you may have come up with.

I realized after last year's service that was sort of a mean thing to say – especially to someone who had given up chocolate the previous year - that the devotional nature of the fast was in some way irrelevant to God.

What I meant to highlight is that God is delighted when we do things to increase our awareness of our faith lives and our inner lives. God craves our deep engagement in the life of faith.

Now when the Lenten discipline of giving up chocolate or anything else is done for the sake of weight loss or gaining extra time or really for non-spiritual reasons then, no, God is not, I expect, impressed by the endeavor. But if it's to highlight or heighten our awareness of our utter dependence upon God, then God loves it when you give up x, y, or z.

If we have any awareness of the transcendence of God – that's the reality that God is wholly and completely *other* from us – it can be easy to think that God isn't interested in a personal relationship with us.

And to be very clear, God is transcendent. God is not just like us only with unlimited powers. I love the movies like "Bruce Almighty" and others that show just what a farce

it would be if God were just like us only with super-powers. Traffic a problem? No worries, part it like the Red Sea. Spare tire? Easily fixed with God's power. Even the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel portrays God as just like us only slightly bigger and more powerful, with an impressive gray beard.

The notion of transcendence says otherwise.

The notion of transcendence relieves us of the horror of a God who is just like us, only more powerful. It relieves us of the possibility that God could be as petty, vindictive, duplicitous, deceitful or lusty as any of us at our absolute worst.

I realize that sounds like a dreadful prospect, a worst case scenario – but that was what the Roman and Greek pantheon of gods was like – just like us, only more powerful.

And the radical notion of the Holy one of Israel is that God is not like that.

Transcendence can make God seem distant, I understand, but it is a relief when one considers the alternative.

And yet, *transcendent* is not all that God is.

Theologians also speak of God's immanence – that God is closer to us than our very breath. That God knows us deeply and yearns for us to yearn for God in return.

If you want examples, think of the ways in which God chooses to relate to us: from the very act of creation, an intimate forming out of the dust of the earth; think of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis, a relationship of covenantal faithfulness, even when the human side of the equation was considerably lacking. With Moses it was a tempestuous relationship, to be sure, but it was real and personal and connected. Our wholly other God is not an absentee God.

And of course there was God's relationship with David.

Our psalm of penitence tonight is attributed to David after the horrible events that led Samuel to come to confront him. On the charges of adultery and murder, David was guilty and Samuel brought to him God's judgment, to which David penned these words of confession:

“1:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

1:2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

1:3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

1:4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.”¹

True confession takes place in a relationship of deep trust and intimacy.

Confession and spiritual disciplines such as fasting from chocolate or meat or anything else – take place within a relationship of trust and intimacy.

And of course, what more personal way to establish that relationship of trust and intimacy than in *person*, in the *incarnation*.

In Jesus Christ, God reaches out to all of us just like Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David and all our forebears. God wants us to *know* and to *trust*.

The Lenten disciplines, if they are to be fruitful, exist so that we might enter more deeply into that relationship of trust and intimacy.

I do realize that Paul raises the bar on occasion – it seems like a bit of braggadocio, all of the myriad abuses that he endured. But it is all leading into a resounding affirmation of God's closeness to what God has made and loved. If we read on, we'd encounter these

¹ Psalm 51:1-4

words quoted from 2 Samuel: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

And so, whatever your Lenten discipline, whatever means you take to engage in this season of penitence and confession, however you choose to examine your inner life in light of Christ, I pray for us all that the means will point is toward Almighty God who is closer to us than our very breath, who loves us and yearns for our love, and whose answer to the words, “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return,” is nothing short of the resurrection.

And so, in light of these things, I’d like to close with these words from J. Barrie

Shepherd,

“Why not

Affirm yourself this Lent.

Be kind and gentle to your you.

Go walking, learn to breathe, read a book,

Know bread, and wine and flesh,

Love yourself

Enough to give it

As a gift of love to life,

Or death.

Share hope with one who mourns,

Grief with one who laughs,

And rediscover all the yous

You left behind in getting to this place

From which, with ashes on your head, you go

In search of Easter.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.