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- Joel: Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.
- Ps: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
- 2 Cor: We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.
- Matt: But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face

Humility is Freedom

We turn from the outward Epiphany journey of looking for the light that comes not from within, but from without, to begin the inward journey of Lent, examining our own hearts, sitting with deep questions, confessing that our intentions have not been pure and our desires often lead us astray, invisibly, and without our consent.

Our guide these forty days is the prayer of the 51st Psalm, a prayer I cannot pray for you and you cannot pray for me and we cannot pray for each other, a prayer we each have to pray for ourselves, for the answer is found within.

Give me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right Spirit in me.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Rock, and our Redeemer.

I have been called a hypocrite so many times by the people I most love that I wonder sometimes if it is my middle name.

When I try to explain that their use of the word and idea of hypocrite is misplaced, that in calling me a hypocrite they are themselves hypocrites, their audible eyerolls drown out my noble efforts to disabuse them of their error.

I have adopted an alternative strategy of saying, "Yes, I am a hypocrite, and I am grateful for your help seeing what is so obvious to you but which I cannot see in myself."

Yet, I would like to rescue the word Hypocrite, as we find in scripture, from how this word is commonly used.

People use it to day to name those who say one thing and do another, a person who fails to live up to the ideals she professes. This sense of hypocrisy can be seen in our gospel lesson, people who perform their piety in order to be seen by others, their motivation not coming from within themselves, not expressing their inner journey, but rather looking out for the approval of others.

In this sense, the modern idea of hypocrisy is consistent with scripture to describe those who say and do things in public that are belied by what they do in private.

But those Jesus condemns in the gospels, those he points to as counter-examples for us are a particular sort of person common but not limited to religious communities, those who elevate themselves by criticizing others, by putting others down.

Religious people are especially good at this, their belief that they have been chosen or have found the truth sometimes causing them to look at others and see them as lesser than, failing to recognize this vision of others expresses their inner souls, for we only love God as much as the person we love the least.

The idea of hypocrisy in the gospels comes from Greek actors playing a part on stage, who pretended to be something they were not.

The person who practices his piety in the public square is merely pretending, he has not opened his inner heart to God, has not prayed in private, has come to understand his own failings, does not yet see that his sins are as visible to others as theirs are to him: the result, an utter lack of humility.

Humility is often referred to in scripture and fear of the Lord, an idea rather out of fashion, but fear in this sense is humility borne of self-understanding, awareness of our own blindness and deafness and need of help, a confession that we live in the broken world we have ourselves created.

But humility is freedom.

Freedom from those who elevate themselves above us by criticizing us for trying our best and for often failing, freedom from shame that says we are wrong and unworthy, freedom from the anxiety that comes from trying to be perfect, freedom from following the rules of expectations no human can meet, freedom from the need to pretend for others

Why then do we pretend?

Because it is so much easier, I think, so much easier to focus on the sins and failings of others rather than confess our own sins and failings, easier to pretend as if we have the answers and can tell other people what to do than to work with them and fail with them and learn with them, easier to demand that others meet our expectations than to hope together with them.

But the easier way is not the right way, and the easier way is not the way Jesus follows. Lent is not about the easier way anyway.

To live real and authentic lives demands more of us than playing the parts we have been assigned and putting on the right face to please the crowd; it requires attending to our souls.

As we embark on our Lenten Journey, I hope we will all see the work of Lent as leading us to freedom, as delivering from our own blindnesses, as an opportunity to practice humility in the world everyday, to do good things secretly, to make sacrifices daily to see how our desires secretly control us.

And hope we will all pray this Lenten prayer when we rise in the morning, take breaks during the day, and lay down to sleep at night, each and every one of us praying this prayer at least three times a day every day these forty days:

Give me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right Spirit in me.

Give me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right Spirit in me

Give me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right Spirit in me

God bless you and your family,
God bless you on your Lenten Journey
God bless Windsor UCC

Amen