

The First Sunday in Lent + March 5, 2017

According to legend, Martin Luther once threw an inkwell at the devil. In a fit of despair he hurled his inkwell and the ink landed squarely on the wall in his study at Wartburg, leaving a permanent stain.

I'm looking forward to joining several of you in June for the Reformation tour in Germany. When I've shared news of my travel plans with friends more than one of them asked: "Will you get to see the ink stain?"

The answer would be "No."

For those who hold to the validity of the story, they say the ink stain was visible up through the last century and then was covered with paint. For those who contend it never happened, they point to a comment Luther once made about "driving the devil away with ink" as a reference to his long hours of translating the Bible into German.

I don't know whether Luther threw a fit at the devil or not but I have no reason to believe it isn't true. Though we modern folk have trouble wrapping our minds around some such thing, I will remind you that we do something very similar the Easter Vigil every year.

You know about the Renunciations.

Consider this a "dry run" for the Easter Vigil in mid-April:

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?

I renounce them.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you away from God?

I renounce them.

We renounce evil and sin that is personal, communal, systemic, and cosmic. We do so with our lips and with our bodies. We may shake a fist or use another gesture. Maybe this year in honor of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation we will supply inkwells. Or, let's not. The custodial staff would never forgive me.

In the ancient church those ready for baptism would face west, considered the abode of darkness, and renounce with the shake of a fist or even spitting and then at sunrise they would turn to face east and greet the rising sun by professing their faith in God.

They said “no” to old allegiances and turned to say “yes” to their new allegiance to Jesus Christ.

We do this turning with our words and with our bodies - with whole selves.

A friend of mine likes to say that people do not think themselves into acting differently. Rather, we act ourselves into thinking differently.

And the ancient Lenten practices of fasting, prayer, and works of mercy are ways of acting into the newness God has graciously given us in Christ.

They are ways of turning. They are ways of coming closer to the Mystery of God.

Fasting isn't the same as dieting. Fasting certainly honors the body but more to the point, fasting honors God. The tradition of giving something up for Lent stems from this practice and it is a physical way of reminding ourselves that we do not live by bread alone.

Prayer may be done in a hundred different ways – in silence, with words or with movement. A gift from God meant for us to pay attention to God.

Works of love involve giving to the poor, feeding the hungry or visiting the sick. Practices aimed at meeting Jesus in the suffering neighbor.

They may be antidotes to the grand temptation of wanting to be more than human.

The crafty serpent in the garden tempted Adam and Eve with the alluring promise that if they picked the fruit they would be like God and the evil one in the wilderness tempted Jesus with fame, fortune, power, and control. But Jesus refused, resisted and renounced and went the way of love.

In some Lenten reflections Pope Francis suggested we fast from indifference and so feast on love. Indifference especially to the stranger but even to one we may know well may foster fear of the other and in turning toward him or her we may see the other, he says, as gift from God.

So, the opportunity in Lent is to turn ...

- Resist greed by never resisting a generous impulse
- Spurn gossip with speech that builds people up instead of tearing them down
- Counter a frenetic and overly scheduled life by learning patience
- Resist judging or blaming others with a little self-examination and consider that you may actually be wrong about something

- Turn from anxiety by taking purposeful Sabbath rest
- Fast from discontent by feasting on gratitude

In renouncing we join Jesus' renunciation by saying "no" to the way of glory and in turning again to Jesus we say "yes" to the way of love, the way of the cross.

At the Vigil, after the renunciations, those ready for baptism or renewal of baptism say "In faith I turn to Christ" and they literally turn as they say these words.

And have you noticed? Our friends turn toward the assembly, the community, the very body of Christ. We are not alone in this life-long journey of saying "no" and saying "yes." We are sisters and brothers committed to praying for one another and supporting one another – a wonderful way God uses to turn us again and again toward Jesus.

- I wonder where you may be fasting and feasting
- I wonder where you resist the gifts that Jesus offers
- I wonder where God is calling you to come close to the Mystery of God's love
- I wonder how you are being called to turn this Lent
- I wonder – from what will you fast in order to feast again on the rich gift of love