

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2023

Do you remember Spring Cleaning? You'd go through the house and take everything out of the dressers and vacuum them out, sort the clothes, refold them and put them away, vacuum behind the dressers. Go through the closets, empty them out, remove the shoes at the back from the pile of dust bunnies, vacuum that up. Wash the woodwork, wash the windows. Back in the day you'd beat out the rugs. Now maybe just vacuum under them. You also kind of took stock as you went and knew what you had, got rid of stuff you didn't need any more, passed it on or threw it out. And when you were finished – which took a while and was pretty hard work, often teamwork – the house smelled fresh and clean and you knew there were no hidden mouse nests or dust monsters anywhere.

Do you remember those days? Probably some of you still do Spring Cleaning. But on the whole it's gone right out of fashion. I have to confess I don't do it. I sometimes get all excited and clean out a couple dressers or a closet, and one of us does usually wash the windows. But the whole thing, no. Now, I expect I've totally lost the respect of some of you. I know it used to be the way you'd judge a woman, by how early she started her spring cleaning and how thorough she was.

Before we moved, we got rid of a lot of stuff. And after we moved we realised we hadn't got rid of enough and we got rid of more. But recently Charles and I have been going through our storage areas, where a lot of stuff just got crammed when we moved in, and sorting stuff. Last time, I got rid of some sentimental mementos. Because I couldn't remember what they were supposed to remind me of or why I felt sentimental about them. Plus a bunch of travel information from the 1990s that might or might not still be up to date. Who knows? Stuff we've been hanging onto for a while.

It actually feels good to clean and to sort and throw stuff away that's no good anymore (or recycle it). It feels like a weight off your shoulders, knowing the area is clean and you've disposed of some unwanted baggage. One less thing to move next time we move house. Or one less thing for our kids to sort through when we're gone. I always tell them sorting our stuff is the price they pay for their inheritance. But it really felt great before we moved to be rid of a lot of stuff we "might need someday," but hadn't actually needed in the last 10 or 20 years. And a lot of it junk that no one could possibly need.

Well, Lent is like that, too. Lent is also kind of out of fashion. So is thinking or talking about sin and the need for repentance. We don't like thinking about these things because it's kind of painful to consider our own flaws. And yet we all know that we sometimes make bad choices, choices that harm other people or the earth or ourselves. We sometimes even make those choices on purpose because we want to harm them, if we're feeling angry enough. Sometimes it's accidental. But we all do it. We all have patterns of behaviour that are harmful, ways of interacting that could be a lot better. We all do. No human being is perfect.

And I don't actually think that we do ourselves any favour by kind of pretending we are perfect. That doesn't mean we have to wallow in guilt or run around telling everyone else what their faults are. That's not likely to make anything better. But it's a good idea from time to time to take a good look at ourselves and see what things we might be doing that are harmful to ourselves or others or the planet. It's kind of like hauling everything out of a closet and taking a look at it.

But it can be surprisingly hard. I don't know about you, but I sometimes don't see all that clearly when I'm looking at my own behaviour, either my faults or my virtues. Some of us tend to justify our faults, blame other people for them, exaggerate our virtues. Others of us exaggerate our faults and ignore our virtues. Taking a good hard look at ourselves is pretty difficult to do. And this is particularly true if we have baggage around it. This usually comes from the way our parents dealt with our faults.

In my family, for example, growing up, everyone seemed to think it was important to assign blame for things that went wrong. Once we'd settled whose fault it was, then that person could be the scapegoat and bear the punishment. I think one of the problems many of us have is that when we figure out we've maybe done something wrong, then we're expecting punishment. And since we don't want punishment, it's hard to admit we've done something wrong. That's how it worked in my family. None of us ever wanted to confess we'd done something wrong because of fear of punishment.

All this blame and punishment and fear didn't help us come to an honest assessment of our own behaviour or help us figure out how we ourselves or everyone else involved could have handled things better, making it into a learning experience. That didn't happen in my childhood. That's one of the patterns in my life that's not helpful and needed to be chucked out. Kind of like those 30 year old roadmaps that actually aren't the best guide for how to get places anymore. We need to chuck them and get new ones, that is, learn new patterns to deal with it when we do make mistakes or just do bad things. That's one of the things Lent is about.

Because God is not like the way my family was. God doesn't want to punish us or blame us. God wants us to learn to do things in better ways. Ways that won't hurt ourselves or each other. That's why God wants us to recognise our faults and feel some remorse about them – so we'll stop doing those things and stop hurting ourselves and each other. Not so we'll feel terrible, not so we'll be punished, but so we'll be healed.

Kind of like discovering the pile of dirt under the dresser. This is not so we can feel like the worst housekeeper ever or blame someone else in the household for not sweeping. It's so we can sweep it up and throw it out and start with a nice fresh house.

I find it helps to think of Lent as a way of spring cleaning the house of my soul, accepting that a bit of dirt does accumulate over time. Take a good look at it, at what I do and how I do it, at my habits, good and bad. And offer it all to God. Kind of like inviting your friend to help with the cleaning, inviting God to help with the cleaning. And then with God's help I can sort through the stuff I find and decide what I keep, what needs mending a bit, what gets thrown out or given away. And give it all a good sweeping and dusting and scrubbing maybe, and have a fresh start.

And all the Lenten disciplines we can take up are really aids to this. They should help us with the self-examination, or with breaking bad habits or establishing new habits. Almsgiving can remind us of our blessings and help us become more generous, eg. I plan to put a quarter in the PWRDF box whenever I have a cup of tea. This reminds me how lucky I am to have tea and also to share my good fortune. Giving up something like chocolate can help us break an addiction (I hope), and also remind us of what we really want out of life.

Attending extra services or Bible Studies can help us learn more about what God actually desires for us. Taking part in an art class can help us unleash our creativity, which we can apply in all sorts of areas of our lives, including figuring out new ways of doing things. Or it can just add some beauty to our lives. These things and more are like the cleaning and decorating tools we use for our Spring Cleaning.

By the end of Lent, we should be nicely cleaned and tidied. We should have eliminated the nests of dust bunnies in our souls. We should have dumped a lot of unwanted, unnecessary baggage. We should have freshened up everything that is inside us. We should be nice and clean and fresh and ready to fully welcome the Resurrected Jesus into our lives and hearts and souls, which is really what Lent is all about. Today is the beginning. I pray that we may all have a holy Lent and come out refreshed and renewed and ready for our Resurrection life.