

Ash Wednesday Homily

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Today we begin this period of Lent, these 40 days that are so reminiscent of Moses's stay at the mountaintop in his conversation with the Lord, or Elijah's 40-day journey to the mountain of the Lord and to that apparition-that seeing of the Lord in the silent wind. It is also the reminder or representation of those 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert. When we think of Moses on the mountain top, or Elijah walking for 40 days without food, or Jesus in the desert without food or drink. At least, I so often think of deprivation-to think of the things that you do not have. And today, I would propose that rather than following what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah did in beginning a path of 40 days of deprivation that we listen to what Jesus says today in the Gospel-of going into the inner room.

I remember reading a commentary on this Gospel passage. In the comment to the person who wrote it was the person who was commenting on the Greek word that is used for inner room *temion*, it is related to another Greek word, *temias*, which means steward. So, the inner room that we are called to go in is not an inner room of deprivation, of nothing, but actually an inner room full of abundance because you cannot be a steward or a dispensary [of nothing] ... Although in times of our poverty you go into the storeroom and there is nothing...but it is a room that He actually called "the storeroom."

It reminded me of a couple of things I remember from my Italian grandmother in Boston. In her old house, she did not have in her kitchen, cupboards, so her hallway was her pantry. In our house we did not have a pantry, so when we visited her [to have] the kids go to "the pantry," her favorite secret room, was special. In there she had all of her (she used to garden a lot) fruit trees, all her canned goods, and we would be like "Grandma, why are they canned goods if they are in all glass jars?" She would have everything there. It was that room where we saw all of Grandma's secret things.

Or I would imagine to...I will have to make a confession that I watched *Little House on the Prairie* when I was a kid, and you would think of the General store that had everything there. If you wanted a pickle, then you would go to the General store. If you needed a box of nails, then you would go to the General Store. If you needed threads, then you would go to the General store. Everything was at that the store. I think the Lord invites us into the Inner Room where there is everything for us and **that inner room is precisely our interior life, that relationship with God where we find everything.**

Simon Sinek is an author of business leadership books. In one of his books he says, 'start with the why.' And we can look at the Gospel today and we can think that "no, Jesus is teaching us the 'what,' prayer, almsgiving, fasting." He is even teaching us *the how*, how to do it. Do not do it like the hypocrites, don't do it, going into the marketplaces. But ultimately, I think that Jesus is already hitting and starting with *the why*. Beneath "the how" and "the what" is *the why*. He is not asking us to pray so that our self-worth can be validated by what others may think of us. He is inviting us into this inner room, "the storeroom" to encounter the love of the Father. That is why we go into the inner room. It is *the why* that helps us live these 40 days of Lent- we are not looking for any other thing than to be able to grow in the relationship with the Father.

When we ask ourselves, "what is the purpose of Lent? [What is] that purpose behind why we close the door to the external things?" Its to live out that deeper love of the Father. "Go into your room, close your door and pray to your Father." It is all very personal. It is my room and nobody else's. It is my

experience of God and nobody else's. Only I can do it. Only I can close the door to those appearances and false things where we gain our security.

Pope Francis speaks so much on that "culture of appearance." Here in Los Angeles, we live in the celebrity cult where so often things are appearances. So often self-worth can come from what others think or say. I think that we can all fall prey to that. **The invitation is this: go into the inner room where there is an abundance, but only because the Father is there because that is where we discover His love.**

As we begin today this journey of Lent, let us begin renewing that deeper purpose, which is the encounter of God's love. As we do ashes today, then that is our symbol for us-not to base our life on appearance. So often as Catholics we love on Ash Wednesday to see the crosses on our forehead. No! The Church is sprinkling on top, and I am sure with the first gust of winds you [will] walk out they will be gone! Even in our ashes, I think the Lord is asking us to go deeper, to the deep meaning of things and deep encounter with Him.