

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2023

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

*Propers: Isaiah 57:15a, 58:1–12; Psalm 103:8–14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10;
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21*

My great-nephew Max is two, almost three. He is a compact, wiry boy, with a shock of unruly blond hair. He has lots of energy. He likes to be on the move, which is to say that he likes to run, climb, and jump up and down. He thinks this is dancing. He likes slides, trampolines, and, recently, pools. In the short videos I receive from my nephew, his father, Max does fall now and then in the middle of all the running, climbing, and dancing, but it doesn't seem to bother him much.

In addition to running and falling, Max likes to fingerpaint, pretend to be Spiderman, and play with his toy trucks. Max loves trucks and has quite a collection of them. I think Max's love of trucks is related to his need to move, to run, to fly. Trucks mean noise, power, control, and lots of movement. They mean figuring out how something works and is put together. In the end, and most important, they mean imagination and play: I sometimes wonder what Max is thinking when he sits there messing around with his toy truck, talking softly to himself. He seems so human then, and when I see him doing that, when I watch him with his paints, or see him helping my brother, his grandfather, make a pie, I think: what a child of God he is, so alive, so beautiful, as he plays in a way most of us have forgotten how to do.

As I've said, Max likes trucks. He likes them a lot, which is a good thing, but hidden within this deep liking there lies a problem that three-year-old Max does not, cannot, yet see as a problem: at some point in every human life there comes this thought, or something like it: if one toy truck is good, then more trucks are preferable. Embedded in our liking there is desire, and desire is not a simple thing. On the one hand, desire turns us outward.

It fuels discovery, learning, and creativity. It gives birth to *love*. It leads us to God. On our good days, we desire God enough to learn that it is God who desires us.

But sometimes our desires malfunction. They get stuck, staying stubbornly the same, refusing to change, or grow, or move forward. Desire can turn into obsession: if one toy truck is good, then more toy trucks would be so much better, and so it is with food, alcohol, money, clothes, sneakers, profits, praise, resentments, books, sex, drugs, cars, conquests, hurts, revenge, prizes, victories, and on and on and on. And suddenly, before you know it, play and wonder have turned into selfishness. At the heart of desire-gone-wrong is a troubled, often a wounded, ego, and that ego cries out, *I, I, I: I want, I need*; and when the ego gets stuck that way, it doesn't like to let go, even when all that wanting causes terrible pain—as it does, for example, for Tolkien's Gollum, with his precious ring, the thing that he must have, even though it is slowly killing him. Desire-gone-wrong results in countless hurts and great sorrow. Desire-gone-wrong is the cause of every sin. Desire is human. Desire-gone-wrong is human, too. Saint Paul writes, “For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my [body] another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my [body]. Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:22–24).

On the front of the Lent postcard that is at the ushers' table, a card I hope you will take with you when you leave here today is a painting called *The Prodigal Son*.¹ Most representations of that parable show us the father, the son, and the prodigal's brother. This painting does something else. It gives us the day, perhaps the moment, when through the grace of God, the young man's life comes unstuck, and in a deeply human moment the young

¹ *The Prodigal Son*, John Macallan Swan (1847-1910). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Macallan_Swan_-_The_Prodigal_Son,_1888.jpg

man “comes to himself” and decides to get up, to go home, and ask for his father’s forgiveness.

The Church, the Body of Christ, has over long centuries developed a season of fast, a season of ascetic practice, designed just for us, designed to help us to look at our desires for what they are, both good and bad, and to get unstuck. It is a time for *askēsis*, which simply means practice or training. It is not a season for fear or obsessive guilt or for beating the body into submission. It is not a time to prove to ourselves or anyone else that we are particularly good, or disciplined, or special. It is a time for honesty, for taking a personal inventory, for “going into our rooms and shutting the door and praying to our Father who is in secret.” It is “in secret,” because our prayer is meant to be a free and honest conversation with God, who knows our needs, desires, hurts, and passions even better than we know them ourselves, who knows us and never runs away.

But the season of Lent is not *just* a private thing. The prophet Isaiah this evening shares with us a vision of fasting that is public and communal. It is not a time for boasting or showing off, seeking to impress God or anyone else. The true fast, the prophet says, has many benefits for us, both as individuals and as a people. By resisting selfishness, helping those who need help, and working for justice we are healed and transformed, “Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily.” Ascetic practice—prayer, worship, fasting, service, sharing, simplicity, talking back to our obsessions and desires, honesty with God—all this frees us and makes it easier for us to recognize the presence of God, who loves us, forgives us, and is forever merciful. It takes away the clutter that we think is so important, so we can rejoice in God’s presence: “. . . if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong.” The season of Lent is meant to strengthen us. Lent is meant to teach us how to choose life and not death.

In its wisdom, the Church, the Body of Christ, shapes the sacred calendar around an alternating rhythm of fast and feast. Today we begin a time of fast, not because we are incorrigible or particularly wicked, but because we are human. We take on our Lenten practices so we can understand what it means to be human beings called to participate in the life of God, so we can prepare to keep the feast, to sit on the shore with Jesus, letting Jesus feed us with his wounded hands, understanding at last that Jesus, Word made Flesh, Son of God, comes to us because he *delights* in us, because it is *his* desire to be with us always (cf. John 21).

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