Ash Wednesday 2018

“Rend you hearts, not your garments” (Joel 2: 12) To rend - to tear, rip, slash, shred. Not something you would do in public. “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them” (Matthew 6: 1) Lent is to be a rough inner journey. The ashes on our foreheads is a sign for people to stay away. You need alone-time to rend your heart.

Go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. “Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.” (Psalm 51) “Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Corinthians 5)

Dare we go into that darkened room, close the door, and rend our hearts? We much rather leave Lent in the public eye. Come to church and hide in public. Pray a chorus of prayers with others in attendance. Confess we are sinners in one voice. It is so easy.

To close the door and rend our hearts, not so much.

First of all, most of us won’t even think about the public stuff. Lent means forty days of shopping ‘till Easter. Clothes, candy, and cards. Not church, stations, abstinence and fasting. (What is abstinence anyways?)

Go into your inner room and rend your hearts! Or are our hearts so calloused that we make it difficult to tear them apart? Layers upon layers of denial, perfumed by scents of “What, who me?”, dressed in ruffles of pretense of self-righteousness. That is the state of our hearts today.

Tomorrow go into that room, close the door, and tear those hearts apart. The crimes that are hidden from the public eye, look closely at. Bullying, selfishness, jealousy, backstabbing, polluting nature, pornography, impure thoughts of discrimination, hatred, vengeance, secreted deeds of lying, stealing, betrayal, secreted words of evil under our breath. Yes, rend your hearts. Yes, let your hearts bleed.

Then after forty days, plea to the Lord to heal your hearts, to reconcile your hearts to your God, your family, your friends, your parish, your community, your world.

Let us be marked with the sign of the ash. It is the key to the inner door of our hearts. Rend you hearts and not your garments. Then let the fire of the Holy Spirit cauterize our wounds. There will be scar tissue but, with God’s mercy and forgiveness, we will be healed.

“A clean hear create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me.” (Psalm 51)