

Ash Wednesday 2019

Ash Wednesday and Lent, for me, could not come soon enough this year. I have been hungry for the season's message, as expressed in the Gospel. "Try not to be seen by others so much," Jesus says. God sees you in secret. Withdraw, go there, and you will find your true reward, your true life.

One of our most compelling urges today, it seems, is to be seen. In an age of transparency and self-promotion, we are living over-exposed lives. And our souls are going into hiding; it's too much for them. Our culture of self-branding and social networking makes us complicit in this self-exposure and reward-seeking from others. But Jesus seems to say that the most important part is found in secret, unseen, away from the crowd.

I am reading a fabulous little book of essays right now entitled, *How to Disappear*, and that seems about right for what many of us need right now. Nature is replete with examples of animals, insects, and birds who are keen to blend in with their environment, rather than to stand out or promote themselves. Not being noticed is the key to their survival and their thriving, and it can be the key to ours.

The willingness to withdraw, the desire to live a smaller, less noticeable life, to harbor or save something of ourselves, the desire to make something about ourselves inaccessible and precious, something that we might reveal, if ever, to only a precious few – this might be the best part of our lives, the most important part.

Because our souls shrink and draw back from the kind of over-exposure we're living through right now. In this age of transparency, social media, personal branding.... Even the word "optics" has taken on new meaning, beyond the science of light. Today, "optics" refers to how THE IMPRESSION of an event now is often more important than the event itself.

All of this is overwhelming for the soul, which craves what is true and authentic and has no interest "optics." So, I suspect that our souls went into hiding a long time ago. I don't think our souls feel like it's safe to emerge in this environment, which might explain why so many are feeling lonely or anxious right now, even angry or combative. Something is missing; we are not ourselves. This in itself might be a good argument for living smaller, less self-promoting lives. Someone you love is hiding deep inside you, and she will not come out until something changes.

William Wordsworth said, "The best portion of a good man's life is his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love."

This seems to be our Ash Wednesday invitation: a smaller, less conspicuous life. The idea is to protect and nurture something precious that is waiting for us in secret, something we've been neglecting within ourselves. The possibility is that Jesus was right: the less we try to be seen, the more we find ourselves in each other. The more we withdraw to a lonely place, the more

our souls emerge and deeper, truer relationships become possible. When we become smaller and less visible, something large and beautiful comes to life. And perhaps most important of all, when we decrease and become less visible ourselves, that's when we start to see people who used to be invisible to us – the poor and the lonely, for example. When we lose something of our concern about our own life, we start to see and feel for the lives of others.

I think this might be a reason Jesus went to the wilderness after the overwhelming affirmation he experienced at his baptism. All of Jerusalem and the surrounding region were gathered there with Jesus and John the Baptist. "Behold, the Lamb of God," John said. And a voice from heaven, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It was a lot to take in, among so many people. So, he was driven to get out of that place, to head for the wilderness, to be alone with God; and Lent is our time to say, "We're going with him." To a quieter place where we can be less conspicuous, where people will not praise us or notice us much, but where our souls can come out of hiding.

For me this year, Ash Wednesday and Lent could not come soon enough.

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