

Rend your hearts and not your garments

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Yesterday I traveled to Elizabeth, NJ to celebrate Ash Wednesday. This vigil was unique in that it took place outside the Correction Corporation of America detention center. This purposefully inconspicuous building is tucked in an industrial zone outside the city. It houses 300 undocumented persons. They live in chains and prison uniforms even though many have never committed a crime. Their prison is kept out of the way so we will forget about them.

Rend your hearts and not your garments, thunders the prophet Joel. Each Lent when I hear this passage I am reminded that my life makes it so difficult to rend my heart. Each Lent I want to know how to do this better but I never know quite how.

This year when the opportunity to go to Elizabeth came up I thought it might be a step forward. The vigil was a reminder to me that Lent is a time to more fervently mirror the compassion and mercy of God. Beginning with those who find themselves imprisoned strangers in a strange land is a good place to start.

At the vigil we heard the story of Kofi who came from Ghana seeking asylum. As soon as he reached Newark airport he was put in chains and placed in the Elizabeth detention center. It took five months for his paperwork to come through.

Rend your hearts and not your garments. This Lent I'm combating sloth. Will Willimon says in *Sinning Like a Christian* that Christians are lead astray by sloth, limiting it to excessive laziness. In reality, sloth is much closer to the negation of passion, the sense that all of this is nothingness and there's nothing we can do about it.

It results in lack of concern for our neighbors that lets others keep them out of sight.

You can't see inside the walls of the Elizabeth detention center. Concrete blocks have been stacked on the inside, blocking out sun and friends. It is a place of forgetting and the forgotten.

I want to confront my own sloth this Lent. I want to cultivate ways of seeing even when this requires the hard work of seeking out. Hanging in my heart is a favored and terrifying verse of Scripture from Proverbs: "If you faint in the day of adversity; your strength being small; if you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death, those who go staggering to the slaughter; if you say, 'Look, we did not know this -' does not he who weighs your heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay all according to his deeds?"

Rend your hearts and not your garments.

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