

Lent

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To practice means that you do something you can do in order to do something that you can't. For example, if I decided I wanted to run a marathon, I would know that despite my best intentions I can't run 42 kilometers but I can run, if I was determined, maybe 1 km.

So I would practice. I would run my 1 km and I would run it again and again until I improved and the distances I could run increased. I would keep on doing what I could do until, eventually, I was able to run 42 km. And if I wanted to play the Waldstein Piano Sonata, which currently I can't, I would need to do, repeatedly, those pitifully small things I can do on the piano often and regularly enough until my skill level increased to the point where I could play Beethoven.

As it is with running and playing music, so it is with our spiritual lives, which is why we have spiritual practice. The kingdom of God, says Jesus, is as close to us as our own hand. By that, I think he means that the goodness and power and elegance of God is never absent from us. We are profoundly loved, completely understood and absolutely accepted by the great old wise one who called this universe into being and holds it there.

What stops us realizing this, and keeps us from living in the liberating knowledge of God's complete love and acceptance and understanding, is our own ignorance. The spiritual life is not about earning God's favor. (What a ridiculous idea! What could we possibly give the one who has given us everything? What could increase the love which is already given to us in fullness?) It is about getting rid of the obstacles which we have placed between ourselves and the truth. It is about *metanoiete*, renewing the way we think, so that the programming that we and others have placed in our brains can be undone, in order that we can live in the light of simple but gobsmackingly astounding truth Jesus came to share with us.

Which is what Lent is about. Forget your received images of mortification for the sake of earning brownie points with the old man in the sky. Think instead of having a

wonderful gift, a gift you have been longing for all your life, and which you now hold in your hands. All that needs to be done is for you to unwrap it and enjoy what has been given to you. And the wrappings are your own odd little habits of thought, and your fears and the ways of thinking which your biology and family and culture and history have instilled in you. Of course you can't undo all that stuff in one hit: the task is too big and complex to allow that. But what you can do is take off one piece of wrapping at a time.

Of course your habits of thought are resistant to change. They are habits after all. To get rid of them you need to do things a different way, but usually, no matter how hard any of us try this, we simply can't.

So what we need to do is practice. We need to do what we can until we are able to do what we can't. So in Lent we do some small thing which will strengthen our psychological and psychic muscles; something that will begin to form us in new habits of behavior and thought; ones which will enable us to live more fully in the truth of our blessedness. Repeating this regularly is a good thing to do, and repeating it for a time long enough to instill it into your "normal" behavior is important. Forty days is a good length of time.

And at the end of 40 days I'm hoping that old habits will have been broken and through the resulting cracks the light will be shining a little more clearly: resurrection.

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