

A MISSING DIMENSION OF LENT

March 2019

Over the years I have probably written fifty reflections on a Lenten theme and preached over two hundred sermons during the season of Lent. I've dealt with dust and ashes, the dark side and the graces, penance and repentance and fasting, scripture readings and personal examinations, accountabilities and responsibilities, prayer and disciplines and opportunities, Palm Sunday and the Cross and more. If I'm honest with myself, it feels like I always come up short, that something has been missing. Year after year it just feels like there is more to Lent than personal piety can embrace.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was fond of quoting Theodore Parker: "Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." It is a hopeful reminder, especially fitting in those times like ours when voices and forces of division and privilege trample on the poor, the refugee, the minorities and those who are different.

Twice I was privileged to be a part of a Mission trip to La Iglesia de Cristo de Nicaragua. Each time we were there we stayed at Casa Amanecer in Managua. It is a simple, beautiful place. By our standards it is lean, but it is taught us to live with less. Its name means, Dawn House. It is a reference to Isaiah 58:8 - "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you." It was a reminder that all who joined in solidarity with La Iglesia de Cristo were witnesses to and participants in a dawning of healing and righteousness and justice. It was a humbling experience, and it helped shift the focus of my ministry.

Instead of getting caught up in the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' and 'musts' of Lenten penitence, perhaps it would be helpful to take a close look at Isaiah 58:6-10, to read the words out loud "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 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."

If it seems like there is a missing dimension of Lent, it may be because we have overlooked the relational quality of faith. Faithfulness is not just about what we ourselves believe and do. There is an inescapable social dimension that involves others. If our Lenten devotions do not connect us to others, what's the point? "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" If our Lenten devotions do not address poverty and hunger and oppression and evil, and more, what's the point? The light of faith is not meant to be hidden under a bushel. We are called to

let our “light break forth like the dawn.” Lent is an opportunity to make the connection between faithfulness and justice. To do less is to miss the gospel of Christ!