

ASH WEDNESDAY TO
FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Ash Wednesday

HEALING FOR EVERYONE

As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.

—Luke 4:40

Throughout the gospels, people arrive with a variety of sufferings for Jesus to heal. No type of ailment or hurt is too little, too large, or too strange for him to tend. He encounters everyone personally—touching them, placing his hands upon them, flesh to flesh, and coming close to the ill, soul to soul. And he does so for *each* of them. He treats them not as impersonal objects but rather as people who matter, people not only in need of his attentiveness but also worthy of it. Did Jesus fear catching a disease? Did he flinch when he saw festering wounds or smelled the stench of the unbathed? Did he feel repelled by the harsh manifestation of an emotional or mental illness? Whatever stirred within Jesus, those emotions did not

hinder his attitude and ability to alleviate people's ill health and bring about greater wellness for those who sought it.

This Lent we attend to whatever produces suffering for us, whether this be our own incompleteness regarding spiritual growth or hurts resulting from physical, emotional, mental, relational, or social issues. There is no illness or personal struggle that cannot be brought to the One Who Heals. Let us approach with confidence and humble trust, asking to be touched by this transforming love.

Companion in My Suffering,
as I step into another Lenten season,
I bring to you what requires your graced touch.
You know what will further my well-being.
I open my mind and heart to you with confidence
that you will tend with care what troubles me.

Today: I reflect on the part of my life containing
discontent.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

WILLING TO APPROACH SUFFERING

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

—Mark 1:40–42

Think of it—Jesus *chose* to reach out his hand and touch a man covered with infectious sores. He deliberately stepped closer to suffering. Not only was this viewed with abhorrence by his society, but also it meant that his planned day was interrupted. Yet Jesus stopped. He paid attention. He reached out. He touched the untouchable. In doing so, a man's life was changed forever.

The hand of Jesus reaching out to the leper serves as an image of our relationship with suffering. One way to

enter Lent and give ourselves to further transformation is by identifying what hurts in us, listening kindly to what troubles us and won't let us alone. What issues of body, mind, or spirit keep nagging for our compassionate attention? Much growth can occur through a willingness to lean toward what we'd rather avoid, to tend what rubs against our will and chafes our heart. This might be touching on our personal unfinishedness in a way that avoids beating ourselves up or facing externally difficult situations with care. It might be reaching out to a hurting friend or neighbor or going far beyond that to the many who suffer across our planet.

Channel of Healing,
today I join with you in being willing
to tend to my own suffering and that of others.
Loosen my grip on avoiding what I dread.
Free me to approach it with a heart of compassion.
I place my trust in you.

Today: I reach out to a person who is hurting.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

PREVENTABLE COMPLAINTS

A woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part."

—Luke 10:38–42

There's Martha in the kitchen, getting more upset with each stirring of the pot. Angry resentment seethes as she goes about what she's doing. When she complains to Jesus, he doesn't support or reassure her. He apparently does not give a hoot about Martha's irritation, perhaps because she's brought her anger upon herself. She

extended a welcome to him. But instead of seeing her work as cordial hospitality, she's fuming about having to do it all alone. Martha had a right to ask for Mary's help, but did her whining change things? Better to talk with Mary later about the next time they have visitors and how they could divide the tasks rather than trying to make herself sound like a martyr to them.

I, too, make choices resulting in my being overwhelmed or distressed. Then I complain about it and expect divine intervention to get me out of the mess. Let's ask ourselves, *When this situation next happens, how might I change my attitude or humbly ask for help to ease the tension inside of me?*

Abiding Presence,

I invite you to be attentive to me in prayer,
but I resist setting aside my plans and schedule
in order to prepare my distracted heart for this.
If I desire you to abide in the home of my heart,
then I will accept the effort it takes to welcome you.

Today: I pay attention to what I gripe about either
silently or aloud.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

DISAPPOINTMENTS

Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.”

—Matthew 11:20–21

Jesus certainly sounds disappointed. Despite giving himself fully, the people resisted changing their ways. Like Jesus, frustration erupts when we weary ourselves by devoting significant effort to personal or societal causes that ends up having little effect. I felt this way after hours of preparing talks and traveling a half day to lead a weekend retreat. I presumed the participants would be engaged. Instead, they were noticeably distracted. When I stood before them to speak, they responded as if I were

not there—just kept yakking to one another and scrolling on their phones.

People invariably disappoint us by such things as not understanding our heartache, failing to appreciate a paid-for college education, ignoring our request for assistance, yawning through a homily, not thanking us after the hours we spent preparing a meal, or tearing apart a carefully created vision statement. When disappointment shows up in your life, how do you respond? Mark Nepo suggests in *The Book of Soul* that “there is always another direction on the other side of pain and disappointment, if we can take a breath and look around.”¹

Vision for My Spirit,
light the path to restored peace of mind
when I fall on the road of disappointments.
Remind me that you also experienced
your own frustration and discouragement.
Lead me beyond my scratchy emotions.

Today: I consider my disappointments and what
I've learned from them.