

Taking Inventory

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Most retail stores have only just completed taking inventory since the busy Christmas shopping season. They hope to find that their inventory has shrunk because people have purchased their goods. But they also know that some shrinkage occurs for other reasons. One that causes great concern is what's known as "internal" shrinkage. Internal shrinkage occurs when, instead of having sold an item, an accounting error has caused an asset to simply "disappear." It can, of course, also happen when customers or even employees shoplift.

But there is a happier outcome that can happen during an inventory; a misplaced box full of valuable merchandise is found that everyone thought had disappeared. Then too, formerly cluttered shelves can be cleared of relatively worthless items that can go on discount, while rediscovered or even forgotten treasures can be returned to their appropriate and valued space. It's a lengthy and tedious process, but it's essential to keep a healthy store running efficiently and effectively.

Today is Ash Wednesday. It is the opening day of Lent; the season where you and I are called upon to take a spiritual inventory. The concepts of internal shrinkage and taking inventory to free up room apply to us, for if ever there is a day on the church calendar to begin taking stock of our spiritual lives, it's this one.

It's time for you and me to consider for a few moments now, whether, during the past year, we've experienced some internal shrinkage. Has something in our relationship with God been lost along the way? If so, what is it and how did it happen? Do we have a sense that we're not as happy, not in as close relationship with God (and maybe others) as we used to be? If we take a hard look, do we find we're scarcely a shadow of our former, spiritually robust selves? Ash Wednesday is Inventory

Day, so it's time to take stock.

Perhaps we've been sandbagged by the outright disbelief in things of faith that's growing in our society. The drag that creates, along with the notion that we might be missing out on something by being faithful to God, can leave us wondering if we've been gullible when we begin or end our day with prayer. Or, perhaps some trouble or heartbreak has rolled in against us in the year past and depressed our hope. Maybe we've just become bored with the discipline of putting God first in our lives, and we find ourselves looking for something else.

It's quite possible to become spiritually bored with and depressed about our practice of faith. That's because, some things we've just always accepted as true and kept on our internal shelves, aren't true, and so aren't helpful in keeping up a healthy spiritual inventory. Here are some really common misconceptions about spirituality.

There's the belief that right experience will always produce a full spiritual life. One such right experience is conversion itself, which, while important for following Jesus, is not the end of the quest, but just the beginning. No single experience can sustain spirituality, because feelings don't last, and experience runs its course. In truth, a spiritual discipline is required beyond experience if we are to keep our internal inventory up-to-date, sorted, and ready for use.

There's also the belief that spirituality is an entity in and of itself. It's the idea that somehow our spirituality is not connected to the rest of life. Real Christian spirituality begins in the private spaces of our hearts and minds, but it doesn't stay there. Christian faith is indeed a personal experience, but it is never to be kept private. When the people closest to us have no idea what we believe, there's a problem. Christian spirituality connects us and is shared.

For some, there's also the belief that a deep spirituality is somehow reserved for a select few. The truth is, each one of us is to consider ourselves as a prime candidate for a deeper walk with God.

Taking inventory can enable us to see if we are being misled by any of these misconceptions. But whatever we find during that internal review, the purpose of it is not to discover where we need a scolding, but where we need restoring. This is a time for the kind of prayer that lays who we are open before God; with all our questions, skepticism, pain, disappointment, failures and even depression, and asks for God's aid to be who we are called to be.

The prophet Joel sets the correct inventory mood in our Old Testament reading this day when he says, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart." Yes, it may need to be "with fasting, with weeping and with mourning," but the important thing is to return to the LORD, our God. God is not here to scold you and me, "...for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." The Lord does awaken within us the awareness of those areas of our lives where we need to repent. But, not so as to beat us up! Rather, it is to woo us in love to change course, and to come back to the life of a true and healing spirituality.

Yes, the Prophet tells us to "rend our hearts". That means to open up our emotions and our reason; literally to pull open our minds. Get rid of the inventory of misconceptions. Open up space on those mental shelves again for the things of God; things like hope, trust, goodness, love, and a genuine desire to serve God in those around us; in short, a whole life that is truly spiritual and fully life-giving. It's time! Begin the inventory!