

Ideas on Lent and How to Get to Heaven

Good morning. When Mary Beth asked me to give this meditation, I asked: "Well, what do you want me to talk about?" She said something about Lent, and then: *how about something about "How to Get to Heaven!"* Oh boy, I thought, that's a big problem: first, because Lent is almost over. Secondly, because in the end getting to heaven is finally the only problem, and it's a big one; thirdly, I am supposed to take care of it in about 45 minutes! Anyway, I decided to tackle these problems with the meditation I want to offer to you today. If it doesn't work, well, thanks be to God that Lisa is going to follow this meditation with: "*4 Ways to Heal the World*": it might suggest corrections for how to heal from this meditation!

So let us begin with some ideas concerning Lent and how this liturgical period should help us to get to heaven. In fact, it really *isn't* a problem that Lent is coming to an end. Our lives are a journey, and simply speaking Lent is supposed to be an intensification in our perennial work to be better human beings, to succeed in the mission we all have of making ourselves and our world better, and thereby, yes, getting to heaven. Lent is like learning a skill: once you have learned it, you don't throw it away, right? What we acquire in Lent, we shouldn't throw away at Easter!

What is the first thing we do to kick off Lent? We receive the Ashes on Ash Wednesday. Have you ever asked yourself what those ashes mean? They were accompanied by the words of the priest: "*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" This small phrase is taken from the book of Genesis chapter 3, when God is speaking to Adam in the Garden, after the Fall. The entire verse says this: *By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* So the ritual of receiving the ashes, and beginning Lent, already refers us back to something essential of our condition here on earth: 1) our life here is not meant to be easy: it takes work, and 2) that this work must be done in a certain time-frame,

because we are mortal. One day we will “return to dust”, and our Lord will ask us if we have used our brief mortality wisely.

What work have we to do? Well, the ashes are a symbol of this work. In many places in scripture we see the use of ashes as a sign of penance, for example, to cover the head with ashes as a token of sorrow for sin and humiliation in (2 Samuel 13:19 ; Esther 4:3 ; Jeremiah 6:26 , etc.). But to speak specifically of the mark on our foreheads, I know of three instances in Christian literature. Two are from scripture, and one is from the great Christian epic poem by Dante, the Divine Comedy. I think these three examples give us three basic Lenten paths that can serve us all year long. Let us begin with the non-scriptural passage:

1) The Divine Comedy: divided into three sections: Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. The second section, on Purgatory (the one that most describes most our life here on earth, as people saved by grace, but that must still fight against sin) begins with the pilgrim souls at the beginning of their long climb up the mountain of Purgatory. They find themselves with 7 “P”s inscribed on their forehead, which they have to wash away through their penance done in Purgatory. These 7 ps (sin is said *peccato* in Italian) stand for the seven mortal or capital sins they have to face, and overcome: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust (plagesg). This is the first meaning of our ashes: that we will try during Lent to rid ourselves of sin and its consequences.

2) The second is from scripture: Ezekiel, 9:4: *the LORD said to him: Pass through the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and mark an X on the foreheads of those who grieve over all the abominations practiced within it. To the others he said: Pass through the city after him and strike! Do not let your eyes spare; do not take pity - wipe them out! But do not touch anyone marked with the X.* The mark is prophetically made in the sign of a cross, and marks those who have resisted the wrongdoings of their times, and have remained faithful to God. This is the second meaning of the ashes: not only to refrain from sin, but do something positive to be coherent with our faith. The Church traditionally

has named three of these “extra things”: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some Fathers of the Church include works of mercy, which is a more inclusive form of almsgiving. Often when I speak of Lent, I speak of these three positive things, as perhaps even a better way of keeping our Lenten observance.

3) The third is from the book of Genesis, 4:15. There, Cain receives a mark on his forehead from God. The mark was to be a sign for those that saw Cain. Despite being a sinner and a very great one, God would protect him in the future because he confessed his guilt to God and asked for his help in the future. This is the third meaning of our ashes: that we will look for forgiveness this lent, especially through confession, and that thus we will be more willing to give forgiveness also.

I think these are three great lessons that Lent teaches us and that we should try to continue in our daily lives throughout the year. They follow the three meanings of the ashes. 1) Pick one sin of the 7 capital sins, and work to avoid it (our bad habits of anger, for example in our words; or lust, in pornography or lack of respect for others; or sloth: laziness!). 2) work positively on a virtue, on coherence with my faith (for example prayer, or charity through almsgiving or works of service). 3) Ask forgiveness, especially through the sacrament of confession, and also maybe add forgiving someone that we have not made up with for many years...

These would already be wonderful activities to pursue during Lent. However, though ashes mark the beginning of Lent, we must also remember that Lent ends with what we call the Paschal Mystery, the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Lord. With the Paschal Mystery, something new is introduced into the world, a new, overwhelming power, strong enough to break the bonds of death. It is something absolutely fundamental, something underneath all of our other activities, that should give life to all of them if we obtain it. It is at the core of this Paschal Mystery. Another way of saying this is the following: even if I do all of

these things I just mentioned, if they lack just one thing, they can become of no use of all. How can this be? What is this “one thing”?

Let me use an image to begin to explain this. In the spiritual life, going further or going deeper usually means getting simpler: the more profound I become, the simpler I become. Think of a building, a skyscraper: the upper floors are extremely complicated: electricity, air vents, elevators, more delicate and finer structures, etc. But as you work your way down, you will notice how the building is becoming simpler: thicker supporting beams, less connections in the electrical circuits, etc. If you get down to the foundations, you will find it has become quite simple: massive but monolithic slabs of concrete or steel that support the whole thing. And finally you get just down to bedrock: one massive piece of stone, unmoveable and about as sturdy as anything on earth. Well, if we apply this to our spiritual lives, what is the bedrock? Or, to return to our title again, if there were just one simple thing that I would have to do to get to heaven, what would it be? What is the one key into the pearly gates?

The answer is all over the Scriptures, but perhaps it is best described by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: there he says *“If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that it may be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing.”* What? Is having faith that moves mountains worthless? Are all our sacrifices useless then? What about all our Catholic rules: going to Church on Sunday, no sex before marriage, no meat on Fridays of Lent? Are all these worthless? No, but they gain merit, they gain their specific worth, they gain a “soul” only when they are filled with the key, the bedrock. This bedrock is charity, love: *“It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”*

So the key to heaven is one: it is charity, or love. Look, an easy way we can think about this is to imagine two thermometers. One is that of charity, the other, our holiness, or how pleasing we are to God. Now, the amazing but so simple thing about our spiritual lives is that the thermometer that measures our holiness, or our being a better person in the sight of God, can never rise higher than our charity thermometer. Our charity thermometer can be higher than our sanctity thermometer, but never the other way around. Why? Well, our catechism (1822) teaches us that: *Charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.* St. Thomas goes on to explain that this charity is what he calls *the principle element of Christian perfection.* He says (I paraphrase) that charity is the exact measure or spiritual perfection because it is the form and director of *all* other virtues! Our perfection grows in the measure that charity grows, for Christian perfection grows in the measure that charity produces its own actions more intensely, and orders other virtuous acts in a more intense, real, and universal way. (Give examples: for example, fasting, or giving money to the poor) This is why charity, love, is the key to all spiritual growth! That is why Jesus in John 13:35 says: *"This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Von Balthasar, in one of his famous books, summarizes it this way: *"Only Love is Credible"*. And S. Thomas says (II-II qu. 23): *Therefore no true virtue is possible without charity.* This goes for all virtues: self-mastery, prudence, purity, fairness, courage, not eating meat on Fridays... They are not true virtues if not set on the bedrock of charity, if charity doesn't unlock their merit and their power. (A funny example of this: the old nun who died in our small town... my Mom who asked why was she not holier, after thousands of communions and confessions...?)

How I wish this truth would penetrate into the Catholic soul! What a difference it would make! It would do away with all hypocrisy (what I call Catholic Pharisaism), all scrupulosity, and all sloppiness too! But I think it would also unleash so much positive energy in the Church:

obedience to the Church would increase, not decrease, because all of the sudden everything would have sense again... even not eating meat of Fridays!

What is this reality love, or charity? We already defined it, but if you notice, in that definition we do what you are never supposed to do in a definition: we use the word love to define charity (*Charity is the theological virtue by which love God, etc.*)! I think that is called a tautology. The problem is that “love” is a very ambiguous, equivocal word. Benedict XVI spent most of his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, on sifting through this word and trying to get to the heart of it, since especially today it can lend itself to all kinds of meanings. He finally concludes there that: “*Fundamentally, “love” is a single reality, but with different dimensions*”. This is so true, and we should remember that when we see other dimensions of love that might seem not so good. Still, I think that one of the passages in Scripture that most helps us to understand Christian love and therefore to live it correctly is the one we have already quoted, from 1 Corinthians 13. It is the famous hymn to charity: *Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated, etc.*

When Paul tries to explain what charity is, he describes it. The first adjective that Paul uses to describe charity is patience (“*love is patient*”). Μακροθυμει: it comes from two Greek words: macro, which means long, in place or time, and thumos, which means basically a passion, but comes from heat (our word “thermos” is derived from this): one definition is “anger boiling up and soon subsiding again”. So here we have a burning passion that does not soon subside, but keeps burning: some translations put “long-suffering”, longanimity. So the first wonderful adjective St. Paul uses for charity is that it is exactly the opposite of “quick-tempered”: it is long-tempered. It is something able to “keep going” even when under a heat or passion that lasts a long time, or when the initial fire has passed away. Now who today would give something like that as the first adjective of love? Passion, yes, but how often do we hear of marriages that break up because

“the passion is no longer there”? They have forgotten the “macro” part of the definition: love lasts!

We find a second wonderful adjective if we skip to 1Cor 13:7. It reads... *“it excuses all things, believes all, hopes all, endures all”*. This “excuses” is *stegei*. Usually it is translated as “excuses”, but in fact, in the original Greek *stegei* comes from *stegos*, which is a simple word for “roof”. Charity has the power, therefore, to cover like a roof, and, in this sense, cover or protect someone or something by supporting, taking “on my back” the “rain” for others. Bear or support would be better.

Do you see where I am going? Love, as the key to our door to heaven, is not what we usually think about when we talk about love; in fact, it is much closer to that “sweat of the brow” that we saw all the way back in Genesis 3. And this can be all summed up in what I call my favorite word in the entire bible. It is the last word of 1 Cor. 7, and it is *υπομενει* (*υπομενει*, from *υπομενεω*). Most Christians have never even heard of it, but it is used extensively in the New Testament: 30 times in the New Testament as a noun, 18 times as a verb, as far as I know! One of my favorite places for this word comes from a passage in Luke 21. Let me read that to you:

“Before all this happens, however, they will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name.¹³ It will lead to your giving testimony.¹⁴ Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand,¹⁵ for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute.¹⁶ You will even be handed over by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends, and they will put some of you to death.¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name,¹⁸ but not a hair on your head will be destroyed. By your perseverance you will secure your lives.*

Our word is found in this last line: *By your perseverance you will secure your lives*. Jesus is telling us: by your *hypomene* you will save your lives, you will enter heaven. As I said, it is my favorite word in the New Testament.

The word of course is a Greek word. In the Gospel we just read the translation is “perseverance”; in other parts of the Bible it is translated by various words such as “patience”, “endurance”, or compound words like “patient waiting” or “trusting acceptance of trials” (this last comes from the Antiphon to the Gospel Canticle in the Breviary’s Vespers for a Sunday in Advent). Its verbal form has even more variations. The Greek word comes from two Greek words, a prefix *upo*, which means “under” (like hypothermia: “below the necessary heat”, or hypodermic needle, “under the skin”) and *menw*, which means to stand, to remain, to be present. So we might translate it super literally as “stand under or under-stand” or “remaining underneath”. In ancient Greece, the word commonly came to mean “a hopeful endurance or constancy, an enduring patience, a steadfastness”. It is that quality in a man that makes him faithful, that always gives him solid ground on which to keep his feet. It is the characteristic of a person who is faithful and loyal and does not swerve from this fidelity even under the greatest trials of sufferings.

So why is this my favorite word in the NT? Because it is so important, and an underdog today, almost forgotten or ignored in homilies and preaching. This is probably so for two reasons. First, because this single word is translated in so many different ways in English. Thus, when we read the Scriptures in English, we probably don’t even realize that we keep bumping into the same word. It would be something like if the language we used translated the fundamental Christian concept of “love” into five or six different words. If this were so, we might never get around to thinking that there was a single concept or idea that united them and was essential to Christianity. The second reason, I think, is that it is an underdog because it describes a characteristic of Christian charity or love that is often out of vogue today, and that we have been speaking of concerning these Greek words. It is the tough part of “love”, the ascetic and dry part of love (perhaps most recently exemplified in Mother Teresa of Calcutta), the unromantic part. It is the being faithful when I don’t feel anything anymore. It is the “love” or commitment or perseverance of the faithful Catholic

housewife of seven children, the faithful Catholic husband and businessman who doesn't cede to the big temptations out there; it is the humble perseverance of so many unsung but faithful priests and sisters (Missionaries of Charity, Little Sisters of the Poor). Maybe we could call it fidelity, maybe perseverance. Whatever, one cannot be a Christian without this *hypomone*, this being able to remain faithful even under the dullest or greatest of trials. Benedict XVI, in *Spe Salvi* 9, says this: « *Hypomone is normally translated as "patience"—perseverance, constancy. Knowing how to wait, while patiently enduring trials, is necessary for the believer to be able to "receive what is promised"».*

Two of my favorite scriptural passages use this word and show us its importance. The first we have already quoted:

1 Cor 13:7: *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* For St. Paul, charity, love, *αγαπη* supports, believes, hopes, and *hypomenes* all things. Charity, the greatest Christian virtue, cannot exist without this faithful perseverance.

2 Thes 3:5: *May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ.* For St. Paul, the descriptive adjective that goes best with God the Father is love, and the best with Christ is *hypomone*. It is to these that we, as disciples, should direct our hearts.

So let us finish. What are the lessons we can learn from Lent, for this life-long journey towards heaven? Well, we should fight against sin (get rid of the "P's" on my forehead). We should try to form the habit of a virtue (be marked by the X of the faithful in the passage from Ezequiel). We should ask for forgiveness and give our forgiveness (the mark of Cain, since he asked for mercy). But let us never forget that above all, and under all, repeating the last line of that Gospel I just mentioned: *By your loving perseverance (hypomone) you will secure your lives.* That is how we get to heaven...

Repairer of Breach: Four Ways to Heal the World
Given as a Lenten Retreat by
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I love proverbs and all kinds of colloquial sayings. In just a few pithy words they capture a nugget of truth or bit of advice about how to live life perfectly. We repeat them all the time without even thinking. “The early bird catches the worm,” “A friend in need is a friend indeed,” and “Actions speak louder than words.”

Each culture expresses wisdom in its own peculiar way. The Italians say, “O mangi questa minestra o salti questa finestra” which means “Either eat this soup or jump out of this window.” We say it more simply, “Take it or leave it.”

Sometimes proverbs contradict each other like, “Out of sight, out of mind” and “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Other times, they don’t make a lot sense at first, like, “There’s many a slip ‘twixt cup and lip” which just means there’s always the possibility of getting your drink spilled all over yourself before you get it to your mouth; a more colorful way of saying that a lot can go wrong between imagining something and doing it. Which is why we should never “count our chickens before they hatch.”

And so, with a nod to the world’s treasure house of proverbs, let me summarize the point of this morning’s reflection with this one. It’s Japanese: “Saisho ni aratte kara arau.” It means, “first the laundry, then the laundry.”

Your puzzled looks tell me I need to explain!

Have you ever stood back to admire the gleaming surface and the clean smell of your freshly washed kitchen floor and then....slap, slap, slap...the dog’s muddy paws go marching across it? First the kitchen floor, then the kitchen floor.

Or have you ever given the car that last buff after spending an hour washing and waxing it and then....plop, plop, plop...it starts to rain? First the waxing, then the waxing.

Or when at the end of a long day you go to bed with that delicious feeling of accomplishment after having washed, ironed, folded and put away the week’s laundry....and then, good morning! The hamper has dirty clothes in it again. First the laundry. Then the laundry. Then the laundry, then the laundry, then the laundry.

Nothing stays perfect for very long.

But of course, I’m not here to talk about kitchen floors or cars or clothes, but rather people. They are the joys of our lives and the bane of our existences. When the contemplative Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, was asked to name the hardest thing about living in a monastery, he said, “Other monks!”

None of us is safe. Something or another goes wrong between us and other people every single day.

My husband gets up on the wrong side of the bed and so my day gets off to a bad start having to look at his grumpy frown across the breakfast table. I speak a little too sharply to someone at work and watch his face crumple in response. With the shoe on the other foot, my feelings are hurt when an unhappy customer yells at me. I could go on and on. I'm annoyed when my niece doesn't acknowledge my graduation gift. My mother pouts when I forget her birthday. I boil over with anger when I learn my colleague has lied to me about how he's spent our company's money. Disappointment, frustration, annoyance, resentment, anger, bitterness, betrayal. This variety is not the spice of life; it's the poison.

Once bitten, the poisoned one bites back. That's because our self-protective instincts and our impulsiveness drive us to retaliate against even little assaults. We don't just get mad, we decide to get even. So, remembering his grumpy morning face, I don't greet my husband when he comes home from work and when he asks what's wrong, I say, "nothing." I yell back at my unhappy customer and blame him for the problem he's having. I decide that without a thank you, my niece is now not going to get a Christmas gift and my mom retaliates for forgetting her birthday by forgetting mine. We give as good as we get.

What is our problem? We know the answer—it's a simple cliché and an undeniable reality: fallen human nature. Meant for unity with God but endowed with free will so that we will love him voluntarily, Satan used this gift against us to destroy the perfect unity of Eden. We all know the story. Eve broke with God in her witless disobedience to the command not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam's cowardly failure to take responsibility for his part in it all caused a second rift.

Then, when Adam blamed Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit, he divided himself from his wife. "Flesh of my flesh" and "bone of my bone"—the one flesh and one bone were now broken in two.

From there, it all went to hell in a handbasket.

Expelled from Eden, Eve gave birth to Cain who farmed and Abel who shepherded and who each sacrificed the best of his work—grain and meat—to the Lord. When God decided, perhaps, to see just how much humanity's first family had learned about staying united under pressure in this new generation by preferring Abel's offering over Cain's. Cain failed the test. He got angry—the first recorded eruption of anger in Biblical history. It would not be the last.

God gave Cain a chance to redeem himself and take responsibility for what he'd done, "Why are you angry?" he said. "Why are you dejected? If you act rightly, you will be

accepted; but if not, sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it.” In other words, you have an intellect. You have a will. Use them! Save yourself!

But he didn't. Like some character out of a mafia movie, Cain served the dish they say is always best cold—revenge—and ruthlessly killed his brother who had done absolutely nothing wrong. How achingly tragic: commonplace marital bickering in Genesis Chapter 3; fratricide in Chapter 4.

The plague continues to this day. “Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose,” the French say. The more things change, the more they stay the same. We are forever killing our brother one way or another and leaving the rubble of a broken world behind us. Gandhi was right: An eye for an eye and soon all the world is blind.

In his teaching, Jesus tried valiantly to save us from ourselves. He said, “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raqa,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother.... (Mt 5:21-24)

Our relationships are in constant need of reconciliation. Each open wound between us needs to be stitched closed again and again. First the mending, then the mending. They say, “a mother's work is never done.” Neither is the Christian's.

Thankfully, the needle and thread, the splints and plaster, the sutures and bandages are right to hand. They're prayers. The fine priests I know have shown me how to use them to mend my relationship with God when I go astray. But it was a rabbi who got me thinking about how prayer can mend the broken-ness between people, too.

Almost ten years ago, my work-friend, Marilee, invited me to go with her to a Yom Kippur service. Marilee is Jewish, obviously, but had taken great interest in my conversion to Catholicism and in the months before and after my confirmation, we had many interesting conversations about faith.

So, when Yom Kippur approached that year, the Day of Repentance and Atonement, the Holiest of Holy Days, Marilee invited me to join her at the synagogue. I jumped at the chance. I'd never been to a Jewish service of any kind and I wanted to see what it was like. But more than that, I wanted to honor my friend the same way she'd honored me by coming to Mass so many times with me.

The service was held in the Mormon church on Lake Avenue in Wilmette which generously offers its building to its Jewish neighbors for the High Holidays because their own small synagogue can't accommodate all of the people who want to attend. That night, the building was packed.

Sitting among all those strangers, I felt out of place at first, but as soon as things got going, I was right at home. All of the prayers, the readings and the psalms were completely familiar to me and so I prayed along with all those men and women I now think of as my older brothers and sisters in faith.

When it was time for the sermon, the rabbi walked to the pulpit. He was a man in his 40s with a round body, brown beard and twinkling eyes. He told us he wanted to talk about prayer and the way it fuses us back to God when we have broken faith with him and how it cements us to him so that we're less likely to wander off in the future.

He told us there are four classic types of prayer and to make them easy to remember, he named them, "Pretty please," "Wow!" "Oops!" and "Thanks a lot!"

I was already familiar with the four prayers, but I'd heard them referred to in a more formal way as prayers of petition, adoration, reparation and thanksgiving—P.A.R.T—the first four letters of the word "participation;" a good way to remember that these prayers help us to participate once again in the life of God.

But, I have to say, the informal way the rabbi named them delighted me.

So, while I listened to him teach about often we ask God for things but how seldom we remember to thank him, and how reluctant we are to admit our mistakes and ask for his forgiveness, and how rarely we simply stop, look around us and say, "How Great Thou Art," it was the words, "pretty please," "wow," "oops" and "thanks a lot" that kept dancing around in my head. I thought, if those prayers heal our relationship with God and bind us ever tighter to him, maybe those same prayers, if we pour them like balm into our wounded human relationships, they just might begin to heal, and so might this broken world.

Thank you! You're great! Please help me! I'm sorry. We say that to God. Why not to each other?

This morning, I'd like to ask you to think about your relationships and focus on the ones that are beginning to fray under pressure, the ones that are showing little splits, and even that ones that have ripped wide open. I'd like to ask us all to think about how we might bind them up by applying a version of our prayers to God to his other children on earth.

Let me start with the prayer that is sometimes the hardest to say... "I'm sorry."

Megan, an adult convert, talked to me at lunch a few weeks ago about this very thing. She told me that for most of her adult life, she rarely apologized to anyone for anything. She thought admitting a mistake (even a little one) or acknowledging responsibility for a failure or for hurting someone else made her look weak and gave other people power over her. "Never apologize. Never explain. That's my motto," she said. And she lived it to the letter.

So, if she bumped into someone with her cart in the grocery store, she responded to the person's surprised and irritated face with, "You were in my way." She would blame her poor performance review at work on the failure her teammates. And, if she happened to offend someone with a careless remark, she would say, "You're just too sensitive. Toughen up!" And worst of all, in hindsight, she now realizes that her marriage failed in large part because she refused ever to say, "I'm sorry". We all know people like Megan. We've all done things like Megan.

Her first Sacrament of Reconciliation, the hardest thing she'd ever done, changed all that. Weeks beforehand, she practiced saying "I'm sorry" to God over and over for what she wanted to confess. And in so doing, she realized just how miserable she had been making herself and other people by being so unwilling to apologize.

But now, she told me, as a blossoming Catholic, she's eager to apply the balm and the bandages and repair a breach between herself and someone else with an eager apology.

So, these days, if she bumps someone's cart in the grocery store, she says, "I'm sorry," and more often than not, hears the person say, "Don't worry. Let me get this cart out of the way." Or at work if she admits, "This mistake was my fault and I'm sorry to have caused you trouble," her colleague will say, "It's ok, now let's try to fix it." Or, when someone takes offense at her careless remark, she'll say, "I'm so sorry I offended you. I didn't mean it. Please forgive me." And in response she hears, "Apology accepted. Forget about it. I've said things I wish I hadn't, too." And last, married once again, she has committed herself to walking straight into any breach between herself and her husband and being the first one to say, "I'm sorry."

Truth be told, sometimes the other person is at fault. But Megan doesn't care. She has realized that saying I'm sorry a little more generously and more frequently than true justice would require doesn't make her weak or vulnerable or a doormat, but more Christ-like. St. Peter said, "By his wounds, ours are healed." So, Megan is willing to be wounded a little too, now and again, in the name of healing.

She said, "My Catholic faith has taught me that three of the most important words in the English language are, *Please forgive me.*"

Three little words...but when most of us think about three important little words, we don't usually think about "please forgive me," but rather, "I love you." "I love you" brings me to the rabbi's next prayer---"Wow!" --the prayer of adoration.

"You amaze me! You delight me! I adore you!" The Bible is full of these joyful exclamations. My personal favorite is the 38-verse litany of praise in the Canticle in Daniel, chapter 3. But, here, I will abbreviate!

“Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestors, praiseworthy and exalted above all forever; And blessed is your holy and glorious name... Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord, Sun and moon... All you winds, Fire and heat, Dew and rain, Mountains and hills, Everything growing on earth, You sea monsters and all water creatures, All you mortals, Spirits and souls of the just, Holy and humble of heart, bless the Lord; praise and exalt him above all forever.” Thirty-eight verses of “Wow! Wow! Wow!”

Fr. Henchey once reminded me that the Rosary itself is just one long prayer of adoration: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed in the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” He told me Bishop Sheen said that Mary never gets sick of being told how much we honor her and how much we love her, bead by bead, decade after decade. None of the rest of us gets sick of praise either. But, how often do we think positive and loving thoughts about other people but never say a word?

When was the last time you stopped to tell the cantor in church whose singing you’ve admired for years how beautiful it is? Or told the Lector how clearly you could hear the Holy Spirit in his voice. Or written a note to the pastor to tell him how much his sermon meant to you even if you did say, “nice sermon” as you shook his hand after Mass. When we pour “Wow” prayers into a relationship they strengthen it the way calcium strengthens our bones. That’s because they encourage people.

My personal motto is, “Never let a positive thought go unexpressed,” and like the Italians say, “l’appetito vien mangiando,” which means the appetite grows with eating; into other words, the more I do it, the more I want to do it. So, look around and you’ll find reason to sing lots of “wow” prayers. You think good things about other people, after all; why not let the praise come out of your mouth?

I know there are reasons not say “wow,” just like there are reasons not to say, “I’m sorry.” Sometimes it’s not wanting to inflame someone’s pride. Sometimes it’s our own pride. And sometimes we want to hold back our praise so as not to cheapen it. But praising someone honestly and sincerely when he or she has truly delighted us is something I can’t imagine we can over-do. If God never tires of our awe at his sunsets and Mary is always happy to hear one more “Blessed art thou,” then there’s no reason to think we are over-doing it when we express joy and delight to each other. Hebrews 3:13 says: “Encourage each other daily while it is still today.” Why not?

And perhaps it’s also worthwhile to think about praising someone you don’t like or someone you’re mad at as a way to begin healing that relationship, too. For surely there is something praiseworthy about each of those irritating people and when we praise them, it’s like offering a free sample of healing balm straight into your mutual pain. Freely given and once received, that gift just might be reciprocated, and then who knows? Once the healing starts, it just might not stop until the whole wound is completely closed up.

Speaking of free gifts, those “pretty please” prayers, humbly asked and generously answered, knit relationships together, too, because, like those “please forgive me” prayers, they bless both the one who asks and the one who answers. Think for a moment about a time when you or someone you love has been terribly sick. Miserable, lying in bed, you ask the person caring for you for a drink of water, you’re so desperate of thirst—“pretty please”—your eyes call out. And so your caregiver brings you water and you drink. Are you not both blessed? Are you not more strongly knitted together? Giving and receiving service has a way of doing that.

We ask each other for hundreds of things every day—help finding the car keys, a ride to the train, help opening a jar of peaches, or for a little more ice cream after dinner. We ask for help when we’re sick, when we’re in trouble, when we’re overwhelmed and we usually get it. But when we’re mad, or in the middle of an argument or when a relationship is falling apart, we don’t usually ask for help, we usually put up our dukes and get ready for a brawl.

When I think about the wounds that are opening up all over my life over politics these days, I hardly know what to do. If I happen to say something my mother disagrees with, she just gets madder at me. And it’s hard not to get mad back at her. The same is true with some of my friends, so much so, that fearing irreparable damage to decades-long relationships, we just don’t talk anymore. Maybe something similar is happening to you.

There are scores of articles about how to handle these problems around the Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter dinner tables, but none of the advice is very satisfying to me. So, in light of my theme today, perhaps we might consider pouring one of those “pretty please” prayers into these wounds before they’re beyond repair.

A good one, I think, is, “Please help me to understand. Pretty please.”

I need to follow my own advice. Sometimes I consider my mom’s political opinions so completely irrational that I don’t stop to consider that while she makes no sense to me, she surely makes sense to herself, and so I ought to ask her why she thinks what she does instead of trying to convince her of how wrong she is. I could say, “Please Mom, help me understand why you think that.” In the right tone of voice, of course!

And when I ask, I need to trust that she won’t repay my plea with a verbal slap in the face. It’s not that hard, really, to make that leap of trust. She’s my mom and she loves me after all. Just as Jesus said, “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?” I don’t think anyone who loves us would repay a sincere request for understanding so badly and surely we would reply just as kindly.

The people with whom we have some relationship—our families, friends, colleagues and neighbors—love us, even if only a little. Attach a “pretty please” to that love and maybe, just maybe, a good conversation will happen. And after that, better understanding, and after that, no more wound even if there is no agreement.

And last, our request, having been kindly answered, deserves the response we've all been taught since we were very young. "Now what do you say?"

Yet, "thank you" comes so slowly and so reluctantly sometimes. Jesus was disappointed sometimes, too. He said, "Ten [lepers] were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?" Then he said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."

"Thank you" is a prayer that will save us, too, because of how firmly it binds us to another person. With a thank you, we recognize that someone has given something of themselves to us and that we are better off because of them. I think sometimes it's not just thoughtlessness or a sense of entitlement that makes us fail to say thank you, but an unwillingness to recognize just how dependent we are on each other and how much we owe one another for all that is good in our lives. And when we realize that, we have to wonder why we ever let the wounds open up between us.

My childhood was not a happy one and my relationship with my dad was always strained. While I can truthfully say I was a dutiful daughter, I have to admit to a hard-hearted one. My dad died in January last year and the last thing he said to me, to my sisters, to his wife, to his nurses and caregivers, and to the other residents at his assisted living home was "thank you." It was the first time he said it to me in all the 61 years I knew him. And I couldn't help but think how different his life and our relationship would have been if he'd been able to say it sooner. But he said them in the end and now I'm not mad at him anymore.

So there we have my meditation on prayer inspired by a rabbi on Yom Kippur.

As the congregation exited the worship space, the people shaking the rabbi's hand as they left, Marilee took me up to meet him. She said, "Rabbi, I'd like you to meet my friend, Lisa, from work. She's a brand new Catholic!" I extended my hand to shake his, my little crucifix hanging around my neck, but rather than take my hand, he opened up his arms and threw them around me. "Thanks be to God!" he cried out. And there we were, one Jew and one Christian. No division. No disorder. Just two people who both love God wrapped in a bear hug of praise and thanksgiving.

During Advent, we read a great deal of Isaiah, not so much in Lent. But now I'd like to quote a bit from one of those passages, Isaiah 58: 9-12, that is especially relevant to my reflection here.

"If you remove the yoke from among you, the accusing finger, and malicious speech... Then your light shall rise in the darkness ...Your people shall rebuild the ancient ruins... "Repairer of the breach," they shall call you..."

Wouldn't it be nice to deserve that name?

We began this morning in Japan and that's where I want to end now, by showing you a piece of Japanese pottery. The first time I went to a ceramics museum in Tokyo I saw something rather amazing: shelves of broken pottery that had been exquisitely repaired with gold, making them look like they had shining veins running all over their surfaces. They were beautiful.

My Japanese friend told me that each piece of pottery was so precious to the person who owned it that when it broke, rather than throw it out, he took it to a special craftsman to be repaired with something that would not only fix the break and make it usable again, but make the pot look even more beautiful.

And so Christ has done the same for us. On Good Friday, he will pour his precious golden blood into all of humanity's wounds and in sealing them up, make us not just whole again, but more beautiful than we were before. And so if you are at the Easter Vigil this year I hope you'll hear the Exsultet with new ears, and when the priest or deacon sing, *O felix culpa*—"O happy sin to have merited such a redeemer," you'll think back on our poor, dear, first parents, Adam and Eve, and how their sin brought about the redemption of the world.

Then, in imitation of Christ himself, although it may cost us a bit of time or a smidgen of pride, let us pour our praise, our pleadings, our remorse, and our thanks into the wounds between us, so that we, too, we heal them with molten gold.

So, here's a last proverb to end our day. When it comes to clothing: First the laundry, then the laundry. But when it comes to people: First the gold, then the gold.