

One of my lenten resolutions is to pick up trash. Normally when I see trash on the street, I leave it there. I didn't put it there. Why should I pick it up? But it makes the neighborhood a better place if I help. My indifference is my sin.

In the days of the prophet Joel, people became indifferent not only with one another but also with God. An enemy army was descending to strike the people, destroy their property, separate their families, kill their warriors. God was strong enough to stop all this, but God didn't. So the people concluded that it was their own fault. They had abandoned God, and now their lives were in danger.

Joel tells the people to return to God with their whole heart, "with fasting, and weeping, and mourning." God doesn't want an empty ritual. Don't rend your garments, Joel tells them. Rend your hearts. Show the Lord you really are sorry for your offenses. God is a fair judge, but they are sinners. If they ask God to judge fairly, they will suffer even more. Instead of appealing to God's justice, they appeal to God's mercy. From their own experience as sinners they have learned this about God: "Gracious and merciful is [the Lord], slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment." They believe God will save them not because of their merits, but because of God's love.

They sound a trumpet. They proclaim a fast. They gather the people - everybody, the elderly, the children and the infants. Even newlyweds leave their bedroom and come out with everyone else so that the entire community can do penance together. The priests assemble the crowd in the place where they usually offer sacrifice, and they pray: "Spare, O Lord, your people." That is how people faced threats in the days of the prophet Joel.

Kansas City is not being invaded by a foreign army, but we see threats all around us. Some of our neighbors are unemployed. Some of our youth have dropped out of high school. Some of our families have divorced. Some of our kids have no father. Some of our friends use illegal drugs. People we don't know steal from us. Others shoot guns in the street. And I usually don't pick up trash.

Suppose that you could make a difference by doing penance for forty days. Suppose that God was willing to listen to your prayer if you cleaned up your own behavior. Would you do it? Would you spend more time with the family you love and the people you don't like? Would you avoid consuming harmful products and quit looking at pornography? Would you eat healthier food and spend more time in prayer? If you knew that you could please God that way, and that God, who is powerful, would then make our neighborhoods better, would you do it?

Pope Francis said in his Lent message this year that all around us is a "globalization of indifference." People are not taking care of those who are in need. God loves each one of us; God cannot be indifferent with any of us. Pope Francis hopes that parishes will become islands of mercy in a sea of indifference.

Maybe you think when Easter comes you're going to be the same sinful person you are today. Maybe you think Lent won't make a difference for you. But if you knew your Lent would make a difference to others, would you do penance? Would you do more than get ashes? Would you rend your heart? Would you change your ways? If so, welcome to repentance. Welcome to the mercy of God.