

USE, ABUSE AND ADUSE
Sermon for Ash Wednesday-Mt 6:1-6, 16-21
LPC, 2/14/18

There has been an awful lot in the news lately about drug abuse. I've wondered – why do we talk about abuse of drugs, and not misuse of drugs? In other contexts abuse connotes mistreatment or cruel treatment, as when a child or adult is abused. The crime of disturbing the peace by verbally assaulting another person in public is called “curse and abuse.”

In abusing drugs, a person does not mistreat the drugs or assault them verbally. One mistreats oneself. So why do we speak of abusing drugs?

Looking at the Latin derivation of the word “abuse” clears up this question. The word is composed of the prefix “ab”, meaning “away from,” and the root “utile” which of course means to make use of. So “abuse” literally means to use something “away from” its correct use, to use it badly or wrongly, in other words.

This is the sense that abuse of drugs really is the same action as the abuse of other persons or the abuse of oneself. One uses the drugs, or the other person, or oneself, in a way far distant from its intended or correct use.

Most commonly abused drugs, including the opioids about which we've been hearing so much, have an intended, correct use. For example, opioids recently made my mother-in-law's last weeks made considerably more bearable, to her and her family's great comfort. But the incorrect use of these substances, as we well know from recent publicity, takes people and their family far away from comfort and into deep misery and sorrow.

Today Lent begins, as if you didn't know. Lent has a strong cultural association with privation: with giving up stuff. I'd like to suggest that while privation may, for some people at some times, part of the picture, it is not the main focus of Lent. To go too far down a path of emphasizing privation would potentially be a movement away from Lent's proper use: a literal “abuse” of Lent.

Jesus says as much when he talks about fasting. The point of fasting as a spiritual discipline is to remove obstacles between oneself and God. The experience of hunger is intended to be a reminder of one's hunger for God. When you hunger for God the same way you hunger for food on an empty stomach you have learned something about having a relationship with God, who is your true

comfort and sustenance. Therefore to affect misery and go about with a long face while fasting is a movement away from the appropriate use of fasting. It is, in fact, literally an abuse of fasting.

The proper use of Lent is movement toward God, however that happens and whatever it means to you. If fasting and privation for you is a movement toward God, then that is a good use of fasting and privation. If fasting and privation only make you feel miserable, or worse, superior to people who are not fasting, that is not a movement toward God. That is an abuse.

I pray that this congregation here present may use this Lent, not abuse it. I pray this Lent may be a movement toward God: a use toward rather than a use away from.

The Latin prefix for “toward” is “ad,” so I’ll invent a word. Aduse Lent. Use Lent as a movement toward God. Aduse Lent, for the love of God. I mean that literally.