



Office of Presiding Bishop
Ecumenical Catholic Communion

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Greetings sisters and brothers,

I want to speak with you about Lent. Ancient monastic traditions might say that Lent is an opportunity to “master the self.” One Buddhist story compares the mastery of self to raising a water buffalo. As the story goes, we do our best to lead the water buffalo along a path, but frequently it chooses to trample our neighbor’s yard or to eat our neighbor’s plants. The water buffalo, like the ego, has a mind of its own. As James Finley, the famous student of Thomas Merton, suggests, because we cannot rid ourselves of our egos, we even bring them to our parties. Why are we surprised that people are gored and trampled and kicked in social situations when we’ve all brought our water buffalos to the party? Just like when our minds wander in prayer and meditation, the answer to this conundrum is to simply “return to the path” when we notice we have wandered. All I can do is ask for forgiveness, make amends, and return to the path.

That is the only cure for the chaos of an untamed water buffalo. Finley reminds us that God and God’s good Earth continue to grace us with all good things despite our wandering from the path; and we should do the same, that is, grace others when their water buffalo gets in our space. However is there no way we can grow in love? Are we just destined to offend each other with no ability to stop ourselves? Will our water buffaloes ever be tamed? We can grow in the patterns of love. But only by being patient with ourselves will we ever be calm enough to see clearly that what our ego is choosing to do is so unhelpful.

Slowly we can assume more and more choice over the matter. Over time we can be perfected even if we are never perfect. Jesus encourages us in the sermon on the mount, “Be perfected as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” We will never outgrow the need for accepting our imperfect selves. But we can grow in love. Be patient with yourself as you see how untamed your water buffalo is. Be patient as you humbly attempt to return to the path. Over time you may love better, but you will never lose your need for the graciousness of God and others.

Perhaps you can remember a time when you thought that you were the only one in the room without a water buffalo at your side. Self-awareness is the beginning of the desire to return to the path and the beginning of the willingness to forgive others when they have gotten off the path as you and I have. Try to leave a little time in your life during lent to pay attention to how your water buffalo is doing. That will get the process started. May this Lent be a time of learning how to love a little more and how to forgive ourselves and others when we don’t.

Before I conclude—and on another important note—I want to remind everyone of the March on Washington to End Racism on April 4th. Please go to www.rally2endracism.org for more information. I’m planning to be there.

Your brother,
+Francis