

“Toward a More Faithful Lent”
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;
Psalm 51:1-3, 6-7, 9-13, 15; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Confession is good for the soul. So, I have confessed to some of you before my own lapse when it comes to Ash Wednesday. I have helped lead this service for almost all of my 35 years in ministry, and I have always found it to be moving spiritually, but several times I have been startled by my own short memory. I have gotten home after leading an evening service, gone to wash my face before going to bed and thought for just a fraction of a second, “Why is my face so dirty?”

I remember quickly, of course, it is the ashes, shaped like a cross, from the service, that I just led... How could I forget so quickly?! I’d like to blame it on age or perhaps the massive amount of data my brain is storing at this point in life, but the truth is my experience offers a reflection of how we often approach Lenten discipline in general. We get off to a good start, we mean well, but we lose focus very quickly.

One minister wrote this past week about the year he gave up sugar for Lent. He started out keeping his vow, but then his courage wavered in the absence of desserts, until he realized that baklava is made with honey, not sugar; and if you make your own, you can put in a lot of honey! He was keeping the letter of his commitment, but not the spirit.

A Lutheran colleague in another setting gave up beer every Lent, but I always wondered whether it was a no-alcohol pledge, or a beer-only pledge, thus making wine “O.K.” and lowering the *bar* of the vow.

Of course, part of the problem with all of these habits is that they are negative in orientation, about what we give up; while Lent is at least as much about positive things, what we take on, in the way of new prayer habits or paths of service. But another part lies in how superficial most of our Lenten pledges are. There’re not about very weighty things.

So, maybe the anti-ritualists are right. Maybe we shouldn’t be making such a big deal out of Lent. Maybe we shouldn’t be making

vows and pursuing change through formalized habits. Those who feel this way point to Jesus' words that we read on Ash Wednesday, words about not practicing our piety in order to be seen by others.

But Jesus doesn't tell us not to practice piety. He tells us how to practice it. Whenever you give alms, he says, whenever you pray, whenever you fast... whenever... He assumes that we will do all of these things and more.

Jesus doesn't do away with habits of spiritual discipline that have been around for centuries, like fasting, which is noted in the reading from Joel. Rather Jesus redirects our habits, focuses our efforts, encourages us to give alms, pray and fast in a way that reveals genuine piety and further develops faith. Jesus knows that we need certain habits of faith. We need practices of spiritual discipline like athletes need practices of physical discipline in order to get better.

So, if we're not off the hook when it comes to Lenten practices, how can we go about this in a more substantive way, in a more enduring way? How can we move toward a more faithful experience of Lent?

We might begin with a recognition of the goal which is to form us and transform us further into the image of Christ. In a way, this is the goal of Christian life as a whole, but during Lent we have a focused opportunity to reflect on the life and ministry of Jesus, especially his journey to the cross; examine our lives in light of his; and ponder the ways we might grow to become more like him.

The ritual we share tonight illustrates this goal. The ashes represent our frailty and sin, our mortality and fallen nature. As from dust we have come, to dust we will return. But the ashes are imposed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. We bear the mark of Christ on our faces and our lives. We walk in the way of the cross. If only we could leave the ashes on throughout Lent, indeed throughout the year, as a reminder that we are Jesus people each and every day!

But if we are Jesus people, if we are seeking to be formed into his image, there is always more work to do, we are never quite there, and this means change is needed. Some of this change involves letting go of things that just don't square with the character of Jesus – attitudes and

actions, thoughts and emotions. And for the most part, we know what these are and we tend to struggle with the same things repeatedly.

Whether it is a habit that borders on addiction or the anger we hold onto, whether it is the way we treat someone who is different or the fact that we fail to speak up when someone is being mistreated, whether it is our obsessive focus on self or our lack of self-esteem that leads to following the pack, we all have things in our lives that do not square with the character of Jesus. The invitation of Lent is to acknowledge these issues so that we can find some way to address them.

This is why we read the words of the psalmist – for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. This is why we include prayers of confession in Lent even though nobody likes prayers of confession. It's why we give things up, if only for a few weeks, and too often little things... We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. If we are ever to change and grow, we have to acknowledge our sin.

Frederick Buechner put it this way in his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*. “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather, what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy.”

The Gospel is ultimately good news. According to the prophet Joel, we serve a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. But the Gospel is bad news before it is good. We have to acknowledge our sin, so we that can experience grace and then let go of some things we just don't need in our lives.

But Lent is about more than letting go of some things, it's about taking on some things. Following Jesus is about more than what we are not, it's about who we are. If we are to grow further into the image of Christ, we not only avoid the things he is not, we do the things he does. This means living in intimate fellowship with God every day, trusting in

God and God's purposes, placing our lives in God's hands. This means treating every person we encounter with kindness and compassion, seeking to understand them, helping them any way we can. This means hanging out with people who need companionship, even if they are down and out; forgiving the people who have hurt us the most, as Jesus forgives the people who put him to death; standing up for what is right and just and true, no matter what the consequences.

So, how do we do all of this in Lent? We probably don't, but we can make some headway, by focusing somewhere. If our need is to develop more trust in God, we might focus on habits of prayer or simply step out in faith. If our issue is relating to and caring for others, we might plan some time with some person or group with whom we struggle or take on a new service project. The clothing ministry can always use more volunteers, our homebound members cannot receive too much attention, Habitat for Humanity and Urban Ministries always need help. If our issue is with forgiveness or the courage to speak up, there may be no easy way to overcome our resistance, but if we are willing to try, that's what matters most. As Thomas Merton once said, the desire to please God does in fact please God (*Thoughts in Solitude*).

Indeed, in all of these things, what matters most is not what we do or don't do, for we are all imperfect. What matters most is what's in our hearts, that we really want to change and grow, that we really want to become more like Jesus. When calling the nation to repentance, the prophet Joel says, "Rend your hearts and not your clothing." Jesus is also concerned about our hearts. He says that wherever our treasure is, there our heart will be also. How we live matters, but how we live grows out of who we are, the condition of our hearts. That's what needs to change most.

So, we're not just talking about giving up sugar and beer and then eating honey and drinking wine. We're talking about something bigger than that, much bigger, being formed into the image of Christ, beginning with the transformation of our hearts. That is worth doing and anything that helps us do that moves us toward a more faithful Lent.