

“What Might We Take On?”
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21
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We think of Lent as a season to give up things like chocolate or alcohol, sometimes something small and symbolic, other times something more substantive that gets in the way of our intimacy with God and spiritual growth. There are always things we might benefit from giving up, at least for a time, and there is value in giving up material things and specific activities to simplify life. In his book *Simplicity* Franciscan Richard Rohr says that less is more. German mystic Meister Eckhart used to talk about a spirituality of subtraction.

But after a year of giving up so much in the way of normal activities, even in the church, it may be helpful to focus on another dimension of Lent — not what we might give up but what we might take on. There is such a thing as a spirituality of addition — not to further burden our lives but to sharpen our focus on following Jesus. We may have to do some subtraction before we do any addition. But what might we take on this Lent to deepen our connection to God, our neighbors and our own best selves?

Habits of spiritual discipline seem appropriate, beginning with the habits Jesus names in the traditional Ash Wednesday reading from Matthew 6 — almsgiving, prayer and fasting. We know what each of these habits involves, though we know more about some than others and practice some more faithfully than others.

Prayer is the obvious go-to habit for Baptists, though we may talk about prayer more than we pray. Almsgiving is a central part of our shared life, giving money to help the poor, as through the fellowship fund. But fasting, just in the general sense of not eating so as to focus on God, is not a part of our normal routine. We only fast for medical procedures. And the reading from Isaiah, which was embedded in our prayer of confession and assurance, expands the usual understanding of

fasting, suggesting that self-denial is not enough; to focus on God, we have to do something for others.

But all of these habits, however we understand them, are designed to deepen our connection to God and neighbor, and Jesus just assumes that we will pursue them — give alms, pray and fast — like any faithful Jew in his time or ours. “*Whenever* you give alms... pray... and fast...” he says. Whenever... But will we pursue these habits faithfully?

When he was Dean of Duke Chapel, Will Willimon told a story about a Muslim student who asked, “Why don’t the Christian students ever pray?” This student observed the five daily times for prayer in Islam, but didn’t notice Christians following any similar pattern. We might say they prayed without ceasing, which is often a cop-out. We might allow for times of prayer alone which no one could observe. This would fit with Jesus’ teaching. But the truth of the matter is that many of us are inconsistent at best in our prayer life, particularly when we compare ourselves to faithful Muslims. And we are more consistent with prayer than we are with almsgiving and most of us do not fast at all.

We might begin our Lenten devotion this year by fulfilling Jesus’ assumption and pursuing these habits of spiritual discipline a bit more faithfully, but then we need to pay attention to his teaching about them — pursue them quietly and humbly as an act of faith, not as an outward demonstration that draws attention to ourselves.

We might use this as a criticism of the Muslim approach to prayer, but it would be a misplaced criticism. And we might note the irony of this text being read in the Ash Wednesday Service each year. Aren’t we drawing attention to ourselves when we are supposed to deepen our faith in secret? It depends on why we are doing what we are doing, and this year, we are off the hook. It is one tiny benefit of pandemic isolation. We are imposing ashes in the privacy of our own homes!

But the point of Jesus’ teaching is that we pursue these habits for the right reason, not to demonstrate our piety to others but to express our devotion to God. And the truth is there are other ways to do this, other habits of spiritual discipline in addition to the ones Jesus names — *lectio divina*, centering prayer, walking the labyrinth, journaling, sometimes just finding a way to pay closer attention to what God might be saying to

us through everyday life. There is no one way to deepen our connection to God. Different approaches work for different people. And different approaches work at different times in our lives.

In his book *Sabbatical Journey*, what turned out to be an autobiography of the last year of his life, the great spiritual thinker Henri Nouwen wrote about feeling nothing in his prayer life. He was in a dead place on his journey and thus clearly in need of the sabbatical. Time and grace moved him to a place where he sensed God's nearness again, but if Henri Nouwen's spiritual life became stagnant, our spiritual life will become stagnant. Sometimes trying a new form of spiritual discipline can help awaken us to the Holy. Our Lenten devotional guides include a number of creative ideas, including the use of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Why not try something new? What might we add this year to breathe life into our faith?

But there is something else we might consider, something else we might add, a bit more in the realm of service to others. We draw closer to God and deepen our faith not simply by looking inward but by reaching outward. We know this and the idea is a part of Jesus' teaching. Almsgiving is a way of serving the poor, and fasting, at least according to Isaiah, is about more than our hunger — it is about our compassion for others. Anything we do for others can deepen our faith, especially as we follow a man who gives everything for others.

Many in this church already do a lot for others. But is there more we might do this Lent, perhaps just for one person or group of people? Contacting a homebound or isolated friend regularly, delivering a meal to medical workers or a housing ministry or someone who has known loss or severe illness, doing what we can for someone who is struggling to pay the rent are but a few ways in which we might take on a bit more.

And in this time of intense concern about issues of justice, especially racial justice, is there something more we might do to loosen the bonds of injustice, as the prophet Isaiah declares? This too is a way of serving others and thus growing in our faith.

Many of us feel like we have done a lot already. I certainly do. I wasn't in church until I was fifteen largely because of my mother's utter

disgust with the church's opposition to integration. Thus, racial reconciliation, part of the Apostle Paul's concern in our reading from 2 Corinthians — though he was more concerned with reconciling Jews and Gentiles — has been at the heart of my calling for nearly forty years of ministry. I have been part of pulpit swaps, shared ministry, book studies, protests, prayer vigils, bringing in speakers like Taylor Branch and Andy Manis, hosting a play like *Defamation*, and integrating two ministerial staffs. But have I done everything I can do?

No. I can listen more; I can show up where it matters, even if the timing is inconvenient; I can worry less about who might not like something I have to say and worry more about those who suffer and what God desires. There is always more we can do.

In any of these realms, in regard to private devotion or service to others, we may have to subtract before we can add. If we are to take on something new, we may have to let go of something old. But we find time for what we think really matters, what we treasure most, as Jesus puts it. One way or another, we find time.

In an episode of *Call the Midwife*, Shelagh Turner, a former nun who is now married to Dr. Turner, is concerned about a young Asian girl whose prospective adoptive parents don't show up at the Mother House. Everyone explores all the options for care, where the child might go, but even though the Turners have three children already — one from Dr. Turner's first marriage, one adopted and one that is theirs together — anyone who has watched previous episodes and thus knows these characters knows what the solution will be. Shelagh will insist that they adopt the girl, at least for a time as foster parents, and Dr. Turner will readily agree. It's just who they are and what they do. They care for children. They will make the time and find the money.

That's what we all do for what really matters most to us. So, in the realm of faith this Lent, when it comes to deepening our connection to God and others, what will we be willing to make time for in the way of private devotion and service to others? What might we take on?