

Lent: The Restraint That Frees

2008 Lenten Practices

Ash Wednesday, February 6 to Holy Saturday, March 22

Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18

From their earliest days, followers of Jesus have set aside 40 days before Easter Sunday as a special time for almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

This season of Lent is meant as a time when we give additional time and intention to our relationship with God. We restrain ourselves from our usual round of daily activities in order to make space and time for being with God. How is it with my soul these days? During Lent we plan to spend some time renewing and re-orienting our life to be more in line with God's desires for ourselves – which I can trust will be for my good, and for the good of the world.

The fact that followers of Jesus created this special season of Lent is a confession that we are not the first to have trouble maintaining a healthy relationship with God. Like us, from the earliest times, followers of Jesus got busy, got distracted, got forgetful and fearful and neglectful, and let their relationship with God go onto the backburner. Sound familiar? Fortunately, they got organized and created Lent so that we wouldn't have to do all the hard work of figuring out what to do from scratch. What are the most helpful things to do to re-new my relationship with God? Over many centuries these three things have been tried and found true: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

Almsgiving

Any material favour done to assist the needy, and prompted by charity, is almsgiving. Just as we recognize that personal rights and freedoms must be balanced with personal duties and responsibilities for the common good of all, so too the church has taught for centuries that the personal right to own property must be balanced with the personal responsibility and duty to care for the poor and needy.

Almsgiving is not the same thing as the offering given in worship even if a portion of the offering is used to assist the needy. Almsgiving entails a personal and direct act of doing good for those in need. It is something done over and above one's regular offering to the church. It cannot be delegated to others because an essential aspect of almsgiving is the heart of the almsgiver. Almsgiving is not almsgiving unless it is done with a personal, heartfelt, caring for the needy. And it is not almsgiving if it is done with a sense of superiority or for gaining the approval of others.

Almsgiving is founded on the conviction that all things come from God, and all wealth is never our personal possession, but belongs to God, given to us in trust, to be used for our good and for the good of the world. Thus, almsgiving is not us giving away our wealth; it is us sharing wealth entrusted to us with those whom God also wants to have a share in the wealth of the world. And for followers of Jesus, it is also most profoundly a way in which we meet Jesus here and now: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you

gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”
(*Matthew 25:35-36, NRSV*).

As a spiritual practice, almsgiving also has the possibility of shedding light on our unseen inner poverty. How do our feelings about the poor and needy impact our relationship with God? For example, if we have feelings of resentment, lack of generosity, or alienation toward the poor, can we truly have feelings of thanksgiving, generosity and intimacy with God? Giving real alms to the real poor may have the unexpected blessing of bringing inner joy and peace to our impoverished heart.

Almsgiving during Lent is meant to bring actual relief to the needy; to change our relationship with the needy; to transform our own understanding of and relationship with wealth; and to reveal and abundantly satisfy any spiritual poverties.

Fasting

A fast means to give up some or all of one's food and to drink only water. This is **not** recommended without the advice of a doctor. However, there are many other ways to fast. The key thing is to give up something that you hunger for every day. For example, cigarettes, a glass of wine, chocolate, watching TV, email, the internet, video games, solitaire, free cell, etc. Fasting is important for 2 reasons.

First, when we fast, we actually pause and experience our hunger instead of quickly feeding it. We then get to reflect on the hungers that drive our life. Just exactly why is it that we are so busy doing what we do? What need, what hunger, is so important that we are literally dying (by giving our time, our life) for it? Is the way we seek to satisfy – or avoid – our hungers actually working? We need food to live. We need shelter, and safety, and love, and accomplishment. But sometimes we get locked in patterns that actually undermine what we are trying to achieve. For example, getting so far in debt that life becomes a rat race, and we are so frazzled that relationships fray and joy turns to ashes. Fasting – giving up something you “need” – breaks the pattern, gives time for reflecting and deeper awareness, and opens the possibility for new choices.

Second, and more importantly, when we fast, we are invited to experience a deeper awareness of our hunger for God. Perhaps we have confused our hunger for God for something else? Food, shelter, safety, love, accomplishments – even life itself – are all good, but they are also all temporary. Can't get no satisfaction? Perhaps we have been neglecting the one and only truly eternal source of joy and peace? As our good friend Jesus once said, “It takes more than bread to really live.” (*Luke 4:4, The Message*) When we fast, we have the opportunity to re-orient our impulses and daily living so that we enjoy the delight of good bread and the delight of our good God. A key for building our experience of – and delight in – God is prayer.

Prayer

The wise should not boast of their wisdom,
nor the strong of their strength,

nor the rich of their wealth.
I any want to boast,
 they should boast that they know me
 and understand me,
because my love is steadfast,
 and I do what is right and just. (*Jeremiah 9:23-24, Good News Bible*)

How do we come to know and understand God? There are many ways, and it is best if we are familiar with more than one; and better still if we practice these ways in community so that we gain from the insights, wisdom and guidance of others – including past generations – as they seek to know and understand God. The United Church of Canada affirms that God reveals God's self in nature (which includes the scientific study of nature), history, personal experience, persons guided by the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and uniquely in Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to focus on the way of personal experience to know and understand God; and prayer is the way to gain this personal experience.

There are actually many ways to pray and we are mostly familiar with "talking to" God ways – speaking to God about our thanksgivings, our needs, our losses, our faults, our sicknesses, the needs of others, and our hopes and requests. But in the United Church, we are less familiar with "listening to" God ways of praying. These ways of praying are intended as a life long practice, but the 40 days of Lent are as good a time as any to begin – or deepen – your practice of listening for God in prayer.

As with every other relationship, hearing the other requires showing up, paying attention, staying focussed, silencing one's own chatter, genuinely desiring to hear the other, and genuinely feeling love for – and from – the other. So the first pragmatic questions to answer are: where in my day can I be assured of 20 to 45 minutes of uninterrupted quiet? Who do I have to talk to about this to get their cooperation, and what arrangements do I need to make? (For sleep deprived parents, I have some suggestions for "guerrilla praying," how to pray during brief "found" moments throughout the day.) Make a "date" to be with God, set a time and a place, and show up.

The second pragmatic question to ask is: How will I pray? What method will I use? To answer this question you need a teacher. I will be offering some "learning to pray" sessions, and would be willing to talk with anyone interested. I can also recommend several good books, and other persons I know who also offer prayer support. The methods are not complicated or difficult to learn. They mostly involve hints for preparing to pray; methods for calming our inner chatter in order to hear God's voice; and hints for what to do when the prayer has ended. If you are interested be sure to talk to me.

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