

First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020
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Give of Yourself

When my sister Lynda was 15, the nun who was her homeroom teacher at the Catholic high school, went around the room and asked each girl what she was giving up for Lent. As her classmates answered, my sister became more and more irritated. Most said they were giving up candy, 90% at least. My sister did not want to share her Lenten discipline. She sat there, sulking, waiting. For a brief moment she thought she would say she was giving up beer—but thought better of it as receiving a demerit that would lead to detention was not anything she wanted. When it was her turn, she said she did not want to say what she was giving up, and that it was between her and God. The nun pulled her aside later that day, and asked if she was ok, and would she tell her privately, what it was she was giving up. “Nothing, she said, I am not giving up anything, I decided to give something of myself. I know I am popular and have dozens of friends. But, I see other girls sitting alone, or studying by themselves, so I decided that during Lent, I would go sit with my classmates who are alone, or who I do not know well at lunch. I am giving myself opportunities for friendship.” The nun asked her to tell the class the next day, what she has said, because it was really important. In the following weeks, the class had some laughs, and joked with my sister when she sat down at lunch, “Here comes Lynda, because we are not popular!” Her classmates, started to talk more to each other as well. Instead of giving up, it became a season of giving. Lynda told me that she made a lot of friends that Lent. And some of them have become her friends for life. I wondered if we as a church might want to take on my sister’s Lenten discipline, and talk to different people at coffee hour during Lent. I think the results would strengthen us.

Lent officially began last Wednesday as we had ashes put on our foreheads, and heard the sobering words, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This is the time of year when we take stock of who we are, and whose we are—that is, our relationship with God. One thing I will always remember from theology class was the phrase, “If you are going to study theology, you must learn to love the questions. If we are taking stock of who we are, then there are questions we need to ask ourselves. Where do we stand? Are we better people than we were last year at this time? Have we grown spiritually? Have we learned more about what it means to be part of a Christian community? Have we engaged the world and learned to live into the wonder of God’s creation? Some questions are more difficult than others, and the one I have the most trouble with is this; where am I weakest and most vulnerable?

Today the scriptures tell stories of temptation. Starting with Adam and Eve as they discover what it means to be human and vulnerable to their needs, wants, and desires. The story of Jesus’ temptation by the devil in the wilderness is one that is familiar to us. Having been identified as God’s Son immediately after his baptism, Jesus is put to the test right away to determine just what sort of “Son” he is going to be. Will he remain faithful to the Father and to his mission here on earth, or will his human side take over?

Let’s look at one of the temptations for a moment. Will Jesus use his power to circumvent the laws of nature and get what his humanity wants and needs, or will He resist? There is nothing inherently wrong with taking care of human hunger. So, what’s the problem? Why does Jesus resist? For any of us who have ever been hungry—even for just a few hours—we know the overwhelming force that sends us seeking food, no matter what! This human condition is so well known we have no lack of ads, memes, and jokes about standing in front of the fridge at midnight, drinking out of the milk carton, eating cold pizza, stealing our co-worker’s lunch. Jesus knows that he can turn the stone into bread, and I am sure his human side must have wanted to do exactly that. There is His vulnerability, his human side, with very human physical needs. That’s where vulnerability is for all of us—our very human physical needs,

compounded with temptation, wants and desires. Jesus resists for one reason. If Jesus is to complete his mission, it is imperative that the divine side of his nature wins, not the human side. Jesus is fully human and fully divine, and the divine side of Jesus clearly triumphs, leaving His trust and relationship with God intact.

God had a purpose in mind when God created human beings. Jesus clearly had a purpose—saving us from ourselves. Temptation is everywhere, and often we are tempted by things that we need to survive and thrive. Temptation, plus doubt and fear, is an overwhelming force in our lives. It leads us to do things we would never imagine we could do. And if we fail enough times in meeting our needs and desires, then we can rationalize and justify almost any action. Here is the problem: human beings were created to be in relationship with each other—no one is an island! Whether we admit it or not, we need each other, and we are connected to each other through God who created us. In fact, God was our very first relationship, even before our mothers in the womb. Like the old Dominion Electric ad said, “We are connected by more than just power lines.”

In order to connect more deeply with God, I took a course in meditation. The instructor told us to clear our minds and to focus on just one word. I chose the word, “Peace.” All became silent, and I became aware of my breathing, slow and intentional. I saw the word “Peace” in my head and heard my inner voice chanting it, slowly and with purpose as I took a breath, “Peace...peace...peace, this lasted for a full 15 seconds. And then, the back-up band in my head began to sing, “All we are saying, is give peace a chance.” There was John and Yoko Ono, dancing and clapping in my meditation, and then a choir in the background started a mash-up with “Peace is Flowing Like a River.” Between the choir and the Beatles and the noise, I had to snap back to the word “PEACE...PEACE...” I said in my head, breathing more quickly. And then I gave in, re-cleared my mind, and set before my mind’s eye, a simple peace symbol. I learned to use objects and scenery in my meditations, because in many ways in my daily life, words fail me, in saying how I feel. I asked the instructor about the noise and distractions in my head. He said that wandering in meditation is ok, and expected for a newcomer—I am not sure he imagined the back-up band! He said not to be disappointed, but to see each time I returned to the quiet in my mind, for however long, as an opportunity for me to reconnect with my spirit and my inner voice. Eventually the quiet time would get longer, and he was right—everything takes practice. C. S. Lewis said, “Relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing has yet been done.” We are not perfect, but we can keep trying, and God gives us opportunities to turn to Him, daily. Lent gives us the opportunity to intentionally take on practices that help us return. I hope that you will choose a thing or two that you will either take on or give up. A Lenten discipline is an opportunity to make a choice that reminds you to invite God into your everyday life.

For me, on my own, I will be lucky to get through Lent and heed the words from Deuteronomy where it says, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” This is the human aspect of my own nature that struggles against the divine—the places where I am vulnerable. The thing that saves me from myself is when I trust in God, and we all need to trust in God. When we do trust God, we change in unexpected ways. Our vulnerability can become our strength, and not because we became strong, but because God strengthens us when we ask. God loves us when we do not deserve it, and finds us when we are lost. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11, Psalm 32

Inspired by: www.workingpreacher.org, and The Rev. Liz Tomlinson, Sermon, 1 Lent 2019, www.stpaulsbox.org