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“The Positive Side of Lent”

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Ash Wednesday (Year A)

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2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

As a Presbyterian, I did not grow up observing Ash Wednesday and Lent. And that is generally true for most people of my age in Protestant denominations. I believe it was only in 1992 that the United Methodist Church officially included a liturgy for Ash Wednesday in your Book of Worship. It has been the past 30 years that Presbyterians have engaged broader liturgical practices. That is why for many of us, the practices of Ash Wednesday and Lenten observances are relatively new.

Yet Lenten practice and significance have long been embraced by large parts of the Christian church. And for Protestants, they can be found now at your local church!

Since these practices may be relatively new for some of us, it is helpful to get our bearings and have some working knowledge of what it is all about. And it may be instructive to understand what it is NOT about, or how such practice may be corrupted into something unhealthy.

The season of Lent is initiated by Ash Wednesday. Lent is traditionally a 40-day period that includes Holy Week, the passion of Jesus, and his death on Good Friday’s cross.

Lent is the dark prelude to celebrating Easter’s sunrise. Without passing through the struggle against human brokenness and alienation and death, the celebration of Easter rings hollow. Only in light of the passion and death of Jesus can the

resurrection of Jesus signal for humanity the end of death's lock-hold on life's meaning and significance—death no longer wields its power over us through fear or failure or hopelessness.

God demonstrates a love that has the power to transcend and defeat death, along with anything else that might separate us from God and from each other. Easter frees us to live beyond fear in order to love God, to love neighbor, and to work toward a heavenly realm and a human community of justice and righteousness and peace.

The 40-day period of Lent reflects the 40 days of Jesus fasting in the wilderness and his temptation experience. For Jesus, the 40 days prepared him for his ministry among needy and often disagreeable people. It also prepared him for a journey to Jerusalem where the cross would embrace him, and he would embrace the cross.

The word Lent comes from the word meaning “to lengthen.” It is related to an astronomical-seasonal phenomenon, the lengthening of the sunlight in the day, which of course is the movement toward Spring.

So the name Lent was first associated with the time of year in which the 40-day sojourn of Jesus in the wilderness and the 40-day period of fasting by the church was observed. The period was culminated in the full-blown arrival of Spring and in the Christian celebration of Easter.

The church also called this 40-day period “the great fast” because it parallels Jesus’ experience and temptation in the wilderness. Jesus fasted for 40 days. In order to share in some way with the burden our Lord carried, many within the church practiced a similar fast. Eventually the names of Lent and “the great fast” were combined to give us the seasonal observation of what we know now as Lent.

What purpose might Lenten practices serve for the church? Well, they can prepare the Christian community to re-appropriate the life-giving passion and suffering of Jesus Christ. In doing so, the faith community offers with faith and love, with justice and peace, ministries of service to the world. For us, the 40 days of Lent can be a reflection on the significance of Jesus for our world and for ourselves, and

how humanity may benefit from the love of God through Jesus, especially as that love works through God's people, the Church.

In the best Lenten practices, the community of faith embraces a three-fold spiritual practice of the season of Lent. This three-fold emphasis can be observed in the historic liturgical language of those churches that have practiced Lenten observance for centuries.

These three practices traditionally include prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Such practices are holistic in nature because they engage one's relationship with God, with one's self, and with one's neighbor. Prayer focuses one on the human-divine relationship. Fasting focuses on the relationship with one's body and the self. And almsgiving focuses on the relationship one has with others, in particular with those in greatest need.

Today those traditional practices have been modernized into focusing on these three things:

- a spiritual practice that engages and deepens the God-dimension in one's life;
- a bodily practice that engages the reality of physical discipline as an act of faithfulness; and
- a community practice that engages one beyond the self and especially for the benefit of the poor.

Unfortunately for many in the church, the present focus of Lent is boiled down to a singular preoccupation. It is reflected in the question on everyone's lips in the season of Lent: "What are you giving up for Lent?"

This question reflects such a narrow focus. It does not embrace the holistic practices of the tradition. It does not adequately embrace the nature and meaning of Lent.

And even worse, as these practices make their way into the American Protestant church, we have further corrupted them. As is typical in the highly individualistic culture and piety of America, we have shifted the focus of Lent to a “me and God” experience based on what I am doing for God.

So American Christians engage Lent with this expectation: “I can suffer like Jesus by giving up chocolate or Facebook or coffee so I can be more like Jesus!” As though any such self-deprivation will place us in the same universe with the experience of Jesus, much less in the same room with Jesus!

The spiritual forebears of the Protestant Reformation repudiated practices of the Roman Church precisely because such practices focused on personal self-justification and not on the grace of God. That is why Protestants have been so late arriving at the party of liturgical observances such as Lent.

And to the extent that Christians use Lenten practices to justify themselves and embrace no ethical application of the faith in the wider world, the Protestant Church would do well to ignore Lenten practices.

Yet holistic practices of Lenten observance need not devolve into personal deprivations and exclude weightier matters.

But we must remain vigilant about that temptation.

C.S. Lewis articulates this well when he writes:

“If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you asked almost any of the great Christians of old he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philosophical importance. The negative ideal of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the

Christian virtue of Love. The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself.”

(from *The Weight of Glory*, by C. S. Lewis)

The shallowest spiritual practice we will ever engage is a practice employed to exclusively ensure our well-being or salvation with God.

Jesus warns his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)

The Gospel of Luke puts this another way when Jesus is quoted as saying: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and yet do not do the things that I tell you to do?” (Luke 6:46) And what has Jesus consistently asked those who would follow him to do as recorded in the Gospels?

To start with, don’t judge each other; be humble and remain in solidarity with the poor and those who mourn; love your enemies; produce good fruits; give to the poor, visit the sick and those imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked; if someone hits you on the cheek, offer the other one as well; forgive, forgive, forgive.

Do you notice that Jesus’ instructions focus on relationships with, and the care of, others? If we are not doing what Jesus has instructed us to do, I do not think he will be fooled.

Today we have a broader theological understanding that can embrace practices from historically and theologically divergent streams. At the same time, it is important that we maintain our awareness of the pitfalls that may be experienced in such practices.

Three understandings of our faith will help us avoid those pitfalls.

- First: *there is nothing we do* which displaces the life and passion and death and resurrection and redemptive power of Jesus Christ.

- Second: the redemptive work of Christ in one person's life has *resounding repercussions for the community of faith in the way God's people practice justice and righteousness* toward others in this world.
- Third, holistic and faithful spiritual practices of the Christian church should reflect the concerns of Jesus as he articulated them.

In the Season of Lent the church can move beyond the narrow focus of self-deprivation and/or self-improvement.

Rather than giving up something we enjoy for a period of time only to take it back up again when Lent is over, what would happen if we gave up something that is bad for our relationships, bad for the ecological condition of our planet, bad for the outcome of justice and peace in the world? And then when the season of Lent is over, why would we want to pick those things back up again?

Or, perhaps we could embrace something new to us, something positive that would enhance relationships or dismantle walls between people, something that would further peace and reconciliation, that would embody caring in ways that we have not expressed previously.

Again, we would not need to abandon these practices after Lent but could add them to our arsenal of love to practice from now on.

So this Lent, instead of giving up something, what can you and I take on that will make a positive difference in your relationship to God, to yourself, and to the world?