
Practicing Lent

So now we have entered into this season of Lent. The season of Lent is most commonly associated in the popular imagination with the notion of “giving something up,” giving something up for Lent. Some people give up chocolate; some people give up alcohol, or sweets.

This past week, Trinity hosted the Scouts’ Shrove Tuesday pancake and sausage dinner, a vestige of the practice from an earlier time of using up all the rich foods—eggs, sugar, fat—before entering into the period of fasting associated with Lent.

These ideas of giving things up, of fasting and self-denial, self-sacrifice, of engaging in penitential practices, have become increasingly unfashionable in our culture. We live in a culture that trains us to believe that our highest calling as citizens is to be consumers: to shop, and spend money, and buy things in order to keep the economy afloat. It’s almost a sacred duty.

We’ve been so well-trained to be consumers that the idea of giving something up often seems quite unnatural for us; it can seem almost unpatriotic, or un-civic-minded. The world around us is inclined to gently,

or not so gently, mock us for any overt observance of the season of Lent. It’s a form of cultural peer pressure.

Lent is a season that brings our identity as Christians into conflict with our identity as consumer-citizens. Especially for us in the liberal church, when those two identities come into conflict, it’s often way easier for us to fall back on our identity as citizens and consumers, participants in our particular social and political culture, than to stand firm in our identity as Christians. We tend not to be comfortable with our Christian identity causing us to stand out; we’d rather blend in.

In his book *Fishing Tips*, John Pentland tells a story about one Ash Wednesday when he receives the inspiration to go out and stand on a street corner in his black preaching robe, and offer the imposition of ashes to any passersby. He recounts how uncomfortable he feels being outside on the street in his robe.

He asks himself, Is this what it feels like to be a religious fanatic? He longs for the safety and comfort of his street clothes that would allow him to blend in, rather than standing out as an ambassador from some foreign world.

As I read the story I could sense the massive discomfort he felt in being publicly identifiable as a Christian. And he's a minister. I think that story says a lot about our discomfort with our Christian identity in the midst of our secular, consumer culture.

This clash of identities is not new, or unique to our particular cultural moment, however. It's at least as old as the stories of Scripture. The Gospel story that Marilyn read for us today, the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert, is also a tale of conflicting identities.

In the story, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and confronted by Satan. Satan tempts Jesus with the ways of the world; he tries to get Jesus to get on board with the norms of the culture of that time, rather than remain loyal to God.

Satan says, Jesus, if you're the Son of God, you can turn these stones to bread! You could feed yourself, and all the hungry people in the world. Imagine the good you could do with your powers.

And Jesus says, No—bread alone is not enough. A full belly is small compensation for a life lived apart from God. There's an echo there of the Genesis story that Marilyn read, where Eve and Adam give into that temptation to eat something delightful and tantalizing; they choose that, and in so choosing, they set themselves apart from God.

Next Satan tempts Jesus to perform a spectacular miracle: Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and cause God to swoop down and save you. Imagine how that will impress the crowds! Anyone who doubts that God is real, all those atheists out there: I mean, c'mon, you'll win them over in one fell swoop!

And Jesus says, No—I trust that God is always there, upholding me; but I'm not going to resort to showman's tricks.

God is not a genie that can be conjured up, or a miracle dispensing machine. God is more like the breath that sustains all of life.

Finally Satan tempts Jesus with all of the world's power and majesty and might, offering Jesus all the world's armies and all the world's gold, and all the world's executive authority. You want to set the world right, Jesus? You want to fix climate change, and child poverty, end inequality, and stop all wars? Well, do ya? Then all you have to do is worship me. Give up on God, say it's all fake, an illusion. Do a deal with me, and get your agenda accomplished.

And Jesus says, No—I will not deny God for any price. There is nothing in this world, even all the world taken together—that is worth more to me than my relationship with God. Trying to achieve the kingdom of God without God is not a project I can sign on to, Jesus says.

Now at this point we might think: Jesus is crazy. Jesus is being some kind of religious fanatic who has lost all sense.

He's choosing to not feed himself or others; he's refusing an opportunity to prove the existence of God; and—for those of us in the liberal social gospel tradition, probably most importantly—he's refusing the opportunity to enact his political agenda, an agenda that would do a lot of good for a lot of people.

And he's doing all this out of some kind of nonsensical loyalty to God. Why is a relationship with God more important than bread? Why is loyalty to God more important than fixing the world's ills? In the liberal church, with our social gospel traditions, we struggle with Jesus' choices here. It seems incomprehensible to us to prioritize religious belief over social justice.

I don't have an easy answer to this; it's something that I write about in my doctoral thesis. The wisdom of our tradition is that good intentions, a commitment to shared liberal values; those things aren't enough to change the world. A commitment to fairness, achieved through the political process, seems to be taking a very long time, and lately has suffered some tremendous setbacks.

On the other hand, a recognition that we belong to God, that all that we are and all that we have, is sustained by the breath of God; this recognition of

our utter dependence upon God, that on our own, without God, we are nothing—this is the beginning of wisdom. And when we also recognize that every other creature, and every other person is as equally beloved of God as we are: that God's intention for all God's children is abundant life and flourishing—that's the next step in our dawning wisdom.

We begin to recognize that we are not called to pass laws that make an unfair world in which evil abounds, slightly less unfair, and simply to constrain some of the worst evils. No—we're called to share our bread; we're called to personally, proactively challenge the everyday evils we encounter: the racism, sexism, Islamophobia, and others evils.

We do that as Christians because we see that it is in the nature of God to do that. We're not called to be good citizens of a relatively fair social order. As Christians, we're called to something far beyond that. We are called to something that transcends our ordinary concerns as consumers and citizens.

We're called to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. Ultimately it is our connection to God that is the only thing strong enough to change us and change our world.

I want to return to that story that John Pentland tells about going out to the streets on Ash Wednesday. As he's standing uncomfortably on the corner, a man in a pickup truck stops at the red

light and sees Pentland in his preaching robe on the sidewalk.

He calls out, "I need the ashes." Pentland approaches, and the man says, "I have cancer. I'm dying." He crosses himself as Pentland makes the sign of the cross in the ashes on the man's forehead, the man whispers, "Amen," the light changes, and he drives off.

And Pentland describes more encounters: some people who were antagonistic, some who were curious, some who were in need, some who received the blessing as a reminder of a truth they had once known but had forgotten.

This season of Lent offers us the gift of an opportunity to remember what we once knew, but may have forgotten: who we really are deep down, and to whom we belong. This season offers us the opportunity to go away, literally or metaphorically, to a quiet place, a wilderness, to enquire after our relationship with God.

In learning to silence some of the other voices in our lives—the voices of advertisers, and politicians, and even well-meaning friends and family, we make room for God's voice. Room to hear God's invitation to a different way of life.

In a few moments we will practice this different way as we gather at the table to share in the meal—of bread that is more than bread, and wine that is more than wine: the body

and blood given for us, given to us, to sustain us on our journey through Lent and through all of our lives. At the table, in the bread and wine, God comes to us that we may come to God. May we meet God at the table today, and know God's presence throughout our Lenten journey. Amen.

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