

The First Sunday in Lent

February 10, 2008

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

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

For several years we have referred to this season of Lent as “a time for accelerated spiritual growth”. We have looked at it as a time to learn new skills and a time to get rid of things that might be slowing us down as we continue on our spiritual journeys...things that might be keeping us from becoming all that God has called us to be. Our goal is to arrive at Easter morning more able to serve God and our neighbor.

This morning, on this First Sunday in Lent, I think it might be helpful to pause and take a look at this year’s Lenten adventure...to consider the general direction that we think we will be traveling and to consider some of the tools that we will be using on our journey.

We began this year’s Lenten adventure together just four days ago, on Ash Wednesday, here at the church. As we entered the church we were given a sheet of paper that Fr. Bob had prepared that contained some thoughts and prayers that can be helpful during Lent.

One of the items was entitled “A Guiding Thought for Lent and Lenten Disciplines” from Forward Day by Day in 1986. It is a good reminder and reads:

*“There is something wrong with our religion, if it is all taken up with our Lenten of respectable self-improvement. Our faith must be outgoing, to the down and out and to the up and out. We should seek self-improvement only in order to serve the Church’s mission better. Lent is a time of self-denial **and** opportunity.”*

So, if our season of Lent is a time of self-examination, for correction and change, and if it is a time for self-improvement, for spiritual growth to prepare us to serve others, what is our plan for this Lent? What tools are we planning to use and what positive benefits for others and ourselves might we anticipate from looking at these two important areas during this year’s Lenten season?

First, let’s look at self examination, and potential changes that we could or should make in our lives. And as we look at self-examination and why it is important, listen again to the words of the Psalmist that we just read. Try to feel what the Psalmist is expressing.

“Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away! Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile! While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long. For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.’ Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.”

Clearly there is great value in becoming aware of any parts of our lives that would benefit from change. But how do we discover these areas? Two suggestions come to mind. One suggestion is to continue to do something very valuable that we have been doing for several years. And that is our daily quiet time, our time of being still and listening to God. Simply ask God to show you any area of your life that would benefit from change and then be still and allow the Holy Spirit to bring it to your attention or to change it.

A second suggestion that I believe will be very helpful is to allow the process of this year's Lenten study to unfold and to develop in your life. This week in "Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton" we read:

"By exploring our beliefs, illusions, attitudes and assumptions, we find our true self and discover how we relate to the larger community..."

As we continue to explore this concept of Contemplative Living, and as we develop our skills of awareness and attention over the next several weeks, we should be more and more able to detect areas in our lives that will benefit from change.

The second area for our focus this Lent, our self-development, is really the purpose of selecting our Lenten study for this year. The various readings and questions are designed to help our development by moving us through:

"...Awakening to an ever-deepening awareness of 'true-self,' 'Contemplation' of a life experienced from a God-centered perspective, 'Compassion' in relationships with others, and 'Unity' realized in our undeniable and essential inter-connectedness with all of creation."

Although I am not certain that I would ascribe the outcome of our Lenten study as "self-development", I will say that our goal is to develop as Christians and to become the people that God calls us to be.

Self-examination... and development. Both leading us to more effective service to our neighbors.

In fact, let's think about service to our neighbors for a second. For quite some time we have prayed daily, and asked: "Lord, make us instruments of your Peace." And we have tried to take love, pardon, union, faith, hope, light, joy, consolation and understanding to the world in which we live. The challenge each day is to really and truly be present to what is right in front of us, to recognize what is needed and then to act. And it really is a challenge. But did you notice that this week in "Bridges" we also read:

"Contemplative living is a way of responding to our everyday experiences by consciously attending to our relationships. It deepens the awareness of our connectedness and communion with others, becomes a positive force of change in our lives, and provides meaningful direction to our journey."

Certainly other areas of need or of service may come to our attention, and we should respond to these. But over these upcoming weeks of Lent, as we seek to grow in contemplative living, as we seek to expand our awareness and attention, let's continue to serve others by noticing more opportunities to be "Instruments of Peace".

Self-examination... and development. Both leading to service to others. These are our goals for this year's Lenten spiritual journey. And I think that we are focusing on them and are addressing them. And at the end of this season of Lent we should be more able to serve God as he desires. But, will these next few weeks be easy? Probably not. Will there be temptations? Will there be testing? Probably so. And that is probably good. Because that may be just what we need if we are to grow.

I say that, because we need to remember, that between the time of Jesus' Baptism and the time that he began to perform the ministry to which he was called, he experienced the time of temptation, the time of testing, that we read about this morning in Matthew's Gospel. Remember that immediately following his Baptism, Jesus had been led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days...the same length of time as we are about to experience in our Lenten journey. At the end of forty days he was hungry and he would have been weak. And it was then that he was tempted. Would he follow through and do those things that he had been called to do? Or would he give in? Very significant questions!

And those are the same questions that each of us will face as we proceed through these forty days of Lent. Will we continue to do our readings, readings that are sometimes very hard to understand? Will we continue to pray and to serve? Will we allow the Holy Spirit to work with us, to develop us, to help us to become the individuals that we were created to be? Will we *allow* the Holy Spirit to help us and will we *allow* the process to unfold?

Just keep in mind, that as we continue through Lent, we, like Jesus, will be tested. We will face temptations. We will each face the temptation to strive, to work too hard to make this a successful Lent. It is a very serious temptation because that is somehow who we are. And it is a temptation that will surely come. But when temptations comes, first the temptation to strive and to work too hard, and then, a little later, the temptation to give up, to quit, remember these words that we read this week from Pema Chodron:

"We try so hard to hang on to the teachings and 'get it,' but actually the truth sinks in like rain into very hard earth. The rain is very gentle, and we soften up slowly at our own speed. But when that happens, something has fundamentally changed in us. That hard earth has softened. It doesn't happen by trying to get it or capture it. It happens by letting go; it happens by the aspiration and the longing...Each of us finds our own way."

Lent is a wonderful time for our spiritual growth, a wonderful time to allow the Holy Spirit to work with us and help us to become the people that God created us to be. Together, let us offer this Lent to God, let us allow ourselves to be led and guided by the

Holy Spirit and let us allow the “gentle rain” of God’s love to fall on us and shape us as we move steadily forward toward Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

AMEN