

First Sunday in Lent

February 10, 2008

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

Theme: What Are You Giving Up for Lent?

As I grew up back in the Midwest, I was always aware of the changing of the seasons within the church, especially the arrival of Lent. Lutherans have always been known as a very liturgical church, and so our paraments change colors, the order of worship changes just a little bit, and certain special readings are heard once again, and we know it is Lent.

But it was even more evident for some of my close Roman Catholic friends way back when. Lent was a season for “giving up” something, their families would eat only fish on Fridays and my friends were told by their church that they had to make some personal sacrifice for these forty days, had to give something up for Lent.

Today is the First Sunday in Lent. And we are a long way from that world of Lenten self-denial. In fact, the world today tends to poke fun at the Christian’s trivial acts of self-denial. A news spot on television the other night showed some of the revelry that went on in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras was created as a response to the Christian tradition of “giving something up for Lent?” So in preparation, people celebrated twice as hard just before Lent, overindulged themselves in whatever excess they could find. Then the newscast showed the traditional “Police Parade” as patrol cars and marching officers proceeded through the streets to clear out the revelers so that the somber season of Lent could begin on Ash Wednesday.

I remember a pastor from my childhood preaching that those who were giving up something for Lent were not really denying themselves much and that most of it was self-delusion, acts of “works righteousness” that could too easily creep into this sort of piety in those other churches. We Lutherans knew that any puny little self denial paled in comparison with the huge act of self-giving that Jesus was about to make for us on His Cross. Giving up a piece of chocolate each week is nothing compared with God’s giving to us in Christ Jesus. true.

And yet, while all this is true, something in those little acts of denial continue to call to me. Yes, Lent is much more than our rather pitiful attempts at self-denial, but neither do these little things lessen the meaning of Lent. And maybe, just maybe we would do well to consider them.

We are called to walk the way of Jesus, the way of sacrifice, during this Lenten season, all the while still living amongst a society of self-satisfied, self-indulgent people. “Deny thyself, take up thy cross, and follow...” is a statement that has never been uttered in a television advertisement.

“Enjoy yourself” That’s our most popular slogan. It is proven in the millions of dollars spent by advertisers during the Super Bowl just a couple of weeks ago. “You owe it to yourself,” “We’ve got it, you deserve it.” These are the all-American motto. And for some years now, much of the church in American has been in the grip of what some have called the “Prosperity Gospel.”

Got something wrong in your life? Want more out of life? Then come to Jesus and He’ll get ‘r done for you. Jesus is there to fix what ails us, to go and fetch us what we want but can’t quite reach by our own efforts. Few “Prosperity Gospel” advocates are quite so crude as to promise us new cars, mink coats, and the like — although it has been done and still is. But more often the rewards promised are psychological or spiritual rather than material — but they are still rewards. And as such Christianity becomes just another self-help technique for getting what we want. Indulge yourself.

Our culture therefore makes Lent one of the most counter-cultural seasons of the church. During these forty days we walk behind Jesus toward His Cross. The work of God in our world is not to help us get what we- want here in this world. Rather it is to enable us for the first time in our self-centered little lives to get what God wants us to have.

And how does God get what God wants? Not through the use of economic, political, or even super-spiritual power — the very three temptations offered to Jesus out in the wilderness — but rather, through rejection and renunciation giving something up.

What Jesus said to Satan was “NO!” One of the toughest jobs of a parent is having the courage to look your child right in the eye and say “No.” And this is such a challenge in a culture where most of what we hear tells us that our job as a parent is to work hard so that we can give our children everything their little hearts desire. And we wonder why they become such a demanding and self-centered generation.

Advertising tells us that we are the most important projects in the world. The only damage you can do to your psyche is by denying yourself what you really, really want. And thus, self-care, self aggrandi7cment, arid self—satisfaction are what political candidates herald as the true “American Freedoms” they can give you. We have been taught to worship the “SELF.”

We have no greater project than ourselves. And Satan is dancing. Perhaps that is why Jesus responded to Satan’s temptations by mentioning “worship.” He repeats the little prayer that all Israel knew by heart: “You shall worship only the Lord your God.” And that is a tough word to hear in a world that tells us to worship ourselves.

The devil didn’t succeed with Jesus — so he went to work on us. We sometimes scoff at those fundamentalist churches that won’t let their children go to movies — even Walt Disney (perhaps especially Walt Disney). Or they cannot touch soft drinks. That’s a no-no. Dating? Not until 18. And evening curfews of 8:00. Unheard of. That’s barbaric. Why those poor children might be permanently harmed in their little psyches.

No, we worship and adore the Brittany Spears of our world who run without boundaries, like animals. Perhaps it is time for our churches to return to a more narrow, backward, authoritarian, fundamentalist format. Maybe it is time for us to learn to “give up” a few more things of this world, teach ourselves that little word “no.”

But, that is probably meddling too much from the pulpit. It goes against everything that enslaves us to the authoritarianism of a capitalist, acquisitive culture, a culture that degrades what our God created our lives to be.

So it will probably take baby steps, small little baby steps to move toward a new life this Lenten season, a life that begins with denying ourselves some small things in order that we might become receptive to greater goods in our lives. Perhaps a few dollars a week given to relieve some of the suffering of others, a few hours taken from ourselves in order to give them for others. These are not huge acts of self-denial, but we must start somewhere.

May God give us the grace to practice some Lenten self-denial. So here is the Lenten question for you as we begin this new journey: What do you need to give up in order to give Jesus a chance with your life? What is that thing in your life that is in danger of taking over your life. What do you love too much in the wrong way?

There is Good News in this morning’s Lenten Gospel. Jesus said “NO!” to Satan, not just once but three times. Jesus triumphed over the temptation to be who He was not meant by God to be. And because of that, because of that, so can you.

The Good News is that Jesus, crucified and risen for you, is more powerful over all temptations, over your personal temptations whatever they may be, than the tempter. Jesus can give us the grace to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses daily and to follow Him. So ask Him, ask Him to give you what you need in order to give up something as you follow Him this Lenten season. Amen.