

“What Should We Give Up?”

Isaiah 58: 1-12; Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

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Last Sunday evening we joined our neighbors for an impromptu dinner. The neighbor kids started talking about what they were thinking of giving up for Lent. This was a foreign concept to my kids, who ultimately decided the best thing to give up for Lent would be school. The other kids quickly informed my kids that you can't give up school because that is considered “necessary.” Alas. The kids shared some other suggestions—like giving up computer, or TV, or desserts, or vegetables, or complaining. But all of these seemed “necessary,” too, except the vegetables. So much for giving up something for Lent!

Tonight we mark the beginning of the season of Lent and perhaps we don't really know what to do with this season either. Should we give up something? If so, what? Should we take on some new spiritual discipline or service? If so, what? And perhaps, in light of the scriptures we've read this evening, the bigger question is: Who should I tell about my decision, if anyone?

According to Martha Moor-Keish, both the prophet Isaiah and Jesus “criticized public piety, not because the actions were wrong but because they were practiced for the wrong reasons. The people of Isaiah's day were fasting and praying to attract God's attention. They cried out to God, ‘Why do you not notice our carefully cultivated piety?’ They were fasting and praying to earn points with God.”

“The people to whom Jesus was speaking, on the other hand, were fasting and praying to attract other peoples' attention. They wanted the social status that came with being good, upstanding religious persons. They wanted points for being seen at the prayer breakfasts. Jesus did not say ‘practicing piety is unimportant.’ He said, ‘Do not do it for public gain.’ (Martha Moore-Keish, *Ideas*, p. 6-7, Spring 2004 edition).

So it seems if we decide to give up something or take on some new service, we must ask ourselves the hard question of why? Are we doing this new spiritual discipline to earn points with God or others? Are we really just doing this for ourselves?

Second, I believe we need to choose carefully what we give up or take on. Will it strengthen our faith, will it help us identify more fully with Christ and his sufferings, will it help us reclaim and renew our baptismal vows, will it help us love God and love our neighbor as we love ourselves?

I have a friend who has tried the spiritual of discipline of fasting (from food)—a perfectly appropriate spiritual discipline. However, he says that when he fasts he never thinks of Jesus, he just thinks about food. After several attempts, he has stopped because this particular discipline does not seem to help him think about Jesus. He just becomes more fixated about food.

A friend of mine put her daughter on the school bus for her very first day of school. All day long my friend fretted, worried and missed her little girl. When the bus arrived at the end of the day, the girl's mother raced to the bus and embraced her

daughter saying, “Did you miss me?” The little girl replied: “I never so much as gave you a thought.”

I’m afraid with some of our spiritual disciplines we never so much as give Jesus a thought. If that is the case we have missed the point.

Third, our scriptures challenge me anew that if we choose to take on new spiritual disciplines or acts of service or if we choose to give up something, we should do so in relative silence. To the degree to which we are able, these decisions should be between us and God. Of course some decisions will have to involve and affect others. Some decisions may affect others in our family. To initiate a new act of service in your life will surely involve others, but our motivations and the outcomes of our actions can be between us and God.

The exception to this principle seems to me to be in asking someone to pray for us or to support us in some way on the journey. It may also be in the need to have someone hold us accountable for the life-change decisions we have made. But by and large our decisions to enter a Lenten discipline for the purpose of spiritual growth should be between us and God.

So why an Ash Wednesday service? Why then a public, communal worship service to begin a season which seems so private and inwardly focused? Are we in danger of being like the people of Isaiah’s day and Jesus’ day by having a service in which we publicly confess our sins, publicly share in the sacrament of communion, and publicly come forward to receive ashes on our foreheads?

I think the danger is always there. The danger is always there that what we do any time we worship together is really for show, or to earn points with God or the people around us. I pray that is not why we are here tonight. I pray it is not why I am here tonight.

In the Presbyterian Church we always emphasize that faith is personal, but not private. Our faith is deeply personal, but it is a faith caught and learned, discovered and lived out in community—with other people—in the church and in the world. We confess our sins to God and to one another. We are baptized not alone, but within the community of faith. We receive communion, in most cases, not alone, but with others because together we are the Body of Christ. We receive ashes on our foreheads, not alone, but together in this place because we are all sinners in need of God’s grace and forgiveness.

The ashes remind us of who we all really are. “We are dust and to dust we will return.” “The ashes remind us of our mortality, the brevity of life, and our need for confession and pardon. At the same time, because the sign on our foreheads is cross-shaped, it’s meant to remind us of our baptism” and our salvation through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. “We who have died to Christ will be raised with him. So the ultimate point of Ash Wednesday is to face up to some hard realities, buoyed by our confident hope in the One who raised Jesus from the dead and who will have the last word over our lives, too” (Ron Byars, in a article in Ideas, p. 7, Spring 2004 issue).

These ashes etched on our foreheads in the shape of a cross bind us to Christ and they bind us to one another as fellow sinners—deserving of death—yet given life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord. These ashes bind us together as fellow sufferers on the journey of life and these ashes bind us to the One who has suffered for us and who continues to suffer alongside us.

Tom Long, who preached here at the Presbytery meeting, told of a minister who went to visit a woman in the hospital. He had been to an Ash Wednesday service and still had the ashes on his forehead. Often the ashes turn out looking as much like a smudge as they do a cross when all is said and done and the woman thought he just had dirt on his face. She said, here let me wipe off that dirt from your forehead. The minister replied: “It’s not dirt. It’s ashes. It’s a cross made of ashes to help me remember the suffering of Jesus—that He suffered for me and that He’s suffering with me, too.” And she said, “I need some of those ashes, too.” And she reached up and took some of the ashes from his forehead and put them on hers. “I need some of those ashes, too.” In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.