

Ash Wednesday 2018
St. Brendan's Anglican Church
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This year we have the odd and a bit ironic overlap of Valentine's Day with ash Wednesday. One day celebrates human love, and the other day observe our own mortality. We are marked with a cross of ashes even as we begin a journey in the way of the cross: Love and Death.

Then again, the might also provoke some reflections on how these two events correspond. Rather than thinking of Lent as a sorrowful pilgrimage, the church has always encouraged us to think of Lent as a journey towards joy. Pope Benedict reminds this church that this is a pilgrimage of gratitude, joy and victory in Jesus. He writes, "[T]he word "Lent" fittingly comes from the Anglo-Saxon *lencten*, meaning "springtime" and sharing the same root as the word "lengthen." In the realm of nature, the hours of daylight become longer as winter turns into spring, a season of new births and new awakenings."¹

In the early church, the weeks prior to Easter or the Feast of the Resurrection, were a time for Christian converts to prepare for baptism. It was a time of learning what it means to be a Christian. In that sense, each Lent we journey back to the beginnings of our faith, we journey back to our baptism.

Baptism was a big event with a great deal of preparation and even a new set of clothes after baptism. It was like being born: being born into the family of God. The closest event we have to the early drama of baptism is our wedding ceremony. The weeks and months prior to the wedding are spent preparing for the big day. Special clothes must be bought. The couple will usually complete a time of pre-marital counseling. The days leading up to the big day are days of anticipation and excitement.

This is exactly how a baptism would have been viewed: a dramatic life-changing moment in a person's life. A new life would begin as party of the church family after baptism.

We are beginning that kind of journey afresh. It is a remembrance of what Christ has done in us, but even as we remember and rehearse our redemption, we turn again toward His love. You might say that Lent is a journey toward love by way of the cross. It is a journey we begin in love even as we move toward love afresh.

By His grace, we are going up into His love. Discipleship is about becoming lovers of Christ and one another. In this sense, we might say that Lent is a reminder that the romantic love of Valentine's finds true fulfillment in the love of Christ fully unveiled in the cross.

Holding this call to know God's love and reveal God's love before us, let us pass briefly over the three primary disciplines associated with Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. While these disciplines are part of the whole life of discipleship, during Lent we pay particular focus: as

though we were relearning these disciplines. The word discipline sounds intimidating. Many years ago, when I first heard about Richard Foster's book, "The Celebration of the Disciplines," I thought I'd rather hear about grace. I associated discipline with legalism or some harsh regimen of physical and spiritual mastery. I was not interested in being a Christian Marine.

Later, I learned the disciplines were much simpler, gentler expressions or habits of a life of faith. On his deathbed, St David, the patron saint of Wales, told his fellow monks, "remember the little things." For him, the Christian life was not summed up in heroic acts of Christian superheroes, but little kindnesses of daily living. Becoming a lover of Christ is often about the dailyness of our walk in the small and often unseen parts of life. ²

Let us think about the little ways prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We must not think of these as techniques for holiness but expression of personal relationship with Christ. That personal relationship might be considered in childlike ways.

For the next few minutes, let's think about our hands in relation to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. When a baby discovers her hands and toes, she discover a world of wonder that of part of who she is.

If we just think of opening and closing hands like the simple act of breathing in and breathing out. The hands give expression to our feelings, our thoughts, and even our dreams. We can create and destroy with our hands.

We begin with the simple act of opening up in prayer. The posture of the open hand extended up is one of the most ancient postures of prayer. The hands reflect our desire to open up to God in worship and in request. In joy and also in sorrow. In complaint and in thanksgiving.

The open hand becomes a sign of our dependence. "Cast all your cares on him for he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). During this coming season, I want to consciously practice the opening up of my hands.

The church has come to understand this posture as the shape of the cross. The cross is a reminder what Christ has done and continues to do in our lives, and it is a reminder that I am called to follow him in the way of the cross. At it's most simple level, it means offering my self afresh to him as a living sacrifice, trusting that he is working in me to will and to do his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

The written prayers in our bulletin provide a helpful template for surrender during this season of Lent. Also, we might consciously take the prayers of the Psalms or the parts of Scripture on our lips. It might also be helpful to carry simple breath prayers with me throughout the day as a conscious form of surrender. Prayers such as "Lord make haste to help me." Or even more

simply, “Lord have mercy.” These little disciplines of prayer are a way of returning to our baptism, to our salvation in Christ Jesus.

Then we might think of fasting. Fasting has become rather popular in our culture of consumption. There are many websites and books on living more simply. There are plenty of articles online about fasting or lent for atheists. There is a sense we have all indulged so deeply, we could stand to reduce.

The great Puritan writer, Thomas Boston suggests that we fast because we see a pattern of fasting throughout Scripture: both in the community of God as well as in the individuals like Daniel and Jesus.³ Fasting can be a form of crying out for mercy as well as commitment to be set apart from the culture around me.

The Desert Fathers saw fasting as a way of reducing the power of the body over the soul. They suggested that fasting was a way we battle untamed desires and selfishness. Fasting was not seen as a technique. One desert mother, fought a long time battle with lust through extended fasting. The story is told of the spirit of lust appearing to her and saying, “You have overcome me Sarah.” She replies, “It is not I who overcome you, but my Lord Christ.”⁴

On one interesting note, the Desert Fathers seem to devote as much or more discussion to the importance of hospitality over fasting. When a guest comes to visit, their needs trump the fasting discipline of the monk.

I would suggest we might also think about a simple act again of opening hands. Fasting might be seen as a conscious act of letting go. Even as we may limit meals or exclude certain foods, we choose to let go. We ask for God’s mercy that we might let go of overwhelming desires. That we might let go of distractions that crowd our lives. We might let go of the regret that has immobilized us. We might let go of the anxieties that paralyze us. We might let go the resentments, the jealousies, the anger that so pervades our culture and often our own hearts. This opening of the hand to let go may be a moment by moment prayer.

Thus fasting and prayer are intertwined in one motion of opening the hand to let go of struggles even as we open to the hand up to the grace of God. Andrew Murray writes, Fasting helps express, deepen, confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God.

Lastly, we think of almsgiving. This is primarily the art of giving to the needy, but the daily acting of giving helps train us to be ready to give. Once again, we think of the open hand. This time giving out. I hold nothing back but am free to give whatever is required and at times to give hilariously or extravagantly. I serve a Lord who gives over and above all that I could ask or imagine. During Lent, I might consciously practice imitating the over and above kind of giving of my Lord.

I have been surrounded my whole life with givers who have taught me this pattern of living. One friend began tipping the entire amount of his meals and sometime even doubling the amount of his meals. Another friend started buying the groceries of the people around him in the store. He would also secretly buy the meals of people around him in the restaurant. Still another friend, began keeping a savings account for giving only. He was prepared to give large sums on a moment's notice as needed.

All these people modeled a way of giving, a life of freely blessing as I have been blessed. All of them discovered what deep joy there is opening the hand and freely blessing those around them.

Lent is a great season to look for ways to give not simply in the joyful spontaneous giving of the moment, but also in the strategic and wise giving to families, groups, ministries locally and around the world. As we feel a burden for a specific culture or people group, we might combine our prayers with financial gifts. We might ask the Lord to show us places and ways we can give of our money but also of our time and our attention. Romans 12 reminds us that we all have a variety of gifts that can be freely given out to bless those around us.

As we travel this Lenten journey and meditate upon the way of Jesus and his life poured out for us and the world, we might simply ask him to show us ways that we can live into the path of his love with hands opened up in prayer, hands opened up in letting go, and hands opened up in giving out. All these gestures of opening are simply an opening to Christ, and through Him and His Spirit opening to the world around us in His love.

¹ Benedict XVI, Pope. Lent with Pope Benedict XVI: Meditations for Every Day (Kindle Locations 124-126). The Word Among Us Press. Kindle Edition.

² See <http://www.medievalarchives.com/2010/11/22/the-little-things-matter-saint-david-of-wales/>

³ “[Fasting] is recommended unto us by the practice of the saints mentioned in Scripture. It was, as we have already seen, practised by David, a man “according to God’s own heart.” 2 Sam. 12:16; Psalm 35:13. By Daniel, a man greatly beloved. Dan. 9:3 and 10:2, 3; and by the devout centurion, Acts 10:30. It was a frequent exercise of Paul, the laborious apostle of the Gentiles, 2 Cor. 11:27. These all had the seal of God’s good pleasure with their work set upon it, in the communion with God allowed them therein. And it is our duty to go forth by the footsteps of the flock, following their approved example.”

Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: Discourses on Prayer*, ed. Samuel M’Millan, vol. 11 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1852), 351.

⁴ Ward, Benedicta. *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (Penguin Classics) (p. 36). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.