

Pastor Jon's Ash Wednesday Sermon from February 26, 2020

"Tithing your Lent"

In a devotion I read this week about Lent, Frederich Buechner comes up with an interesting way look at the season of Lent. He writes, "In many cultures, there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth or tithe of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the 40 days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days." Looking at Lent as a Tithe in days helps us to be more intentional with these days.

Buechner continues with some questions to reflect on during Lent that can draw you deeper into your identity and purpose on earth.

"When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like? What do you see in it that you most deplore? What is your happiest memory? What is the one thing you have done in your life that you most want to undo? Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for? If this were last day on earth, what would you do with it?"

One of the big messages in Lent is to return to the Lord your God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. The prophet Joel calls for people to return to God in our first lesson in order to avert disaster. A locust plague was among them. Joel called for a fast and repentance. We sang these words just before the reading of the Holy Gospel today.

To return to something means you left it behind. I recently returned to the YMCA after a hiatus due to illness. Thanks to a friend texting me and inviting me to play racquetball, I went back. I feel so much better when I work out. It was good to return.

Returning to God means that somehow the people have turned away from God. This is our human condition. We do put ourselves and our treasures before God. Certainly God has never left us, but we have a tendency to put other things first. I know I struggle with balancing my work and my kid's activities.

Returning to God during Lent involves using the disciplines of Lent: Self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, and acts of love or almsgiving.

Fasting usually gets all the attention during Lent. People ask, what are you going to give up for Lent? Or what are you going to do more or less of during the season of Lent that is beneficial to you? Is giving up chocolate going to bring you closer to God or make you more cranky?

People fasted in the Bible to remind them of God's daily provision. They also fasted in times of grief or during times of public concern. If you worry like I do about our earth or our country, fasting might remind you to become a better steward and to pray for our leaders.

We also hear the language of repentance or self-examination during Lent. To repent means to turn around or do a 180... to make a life change. What are you doing that is not good for you or the people around you? Repentance means you stop doing it. How are your decisions hurting you or those around you? What is drawing you away from God and neighbor? What is robbing you of precious time?

During Lent, you can choose to do something that could be beneficial to you and those around you. For example, you could decide to fast from being tethered to your phone all hours of the day. You could fast from social media. Jeranna and I fasted from TV one Lent. As a result, we spent more time together, played more cards, took more walks.

Maybe you need to fast from negativity around you, or gossip, or cutting down yourself or others. I find that we are hardest on ourselves. We don't see ourselves or others as God sees us, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

No matter how you choose to "tithe" your Lent, Jesus warns us in the Gospel to do it without any fanfare. The religious leaders were looking for attention when they prayed or fasted or gave alms. You know what changes you need to make, go ahead and make them for yourself. Jesus says in our Gospel you should not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

Tonight you invited to receive an ash cross on your hand or forehead. This reminds us that we are dead in our sins and that we are mortal. Our bodies and lives are fragile. We don't know how long we have on this earth.

The cross also reminds us that God's story didn't end there. Jesus went through the cross to Easter. No matter how much we mess up or fall short, there is grace, forgiveness, and resurrection hope for us. We are all in a process of becoming more gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, thanks to God's word and sacraments.

Amen!