

## LENT #1: GIVE UP YOUR ILLUSIONS

(03/05/17)

Scripture Lesson: 1 John 1:1-10

*"Spirituality is a matter of less, not more."* (Meister Eckhart)

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent, the time set aside to prepare for the celebration of Easter, is forty days and six Sundays from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Our word "Lent" is not really a religious word or term; it is derived from the English word *lencten* meaning "lengthen," because in the Northern Hemisphere Lent takes place as the days begin to lengthen in the season of spring.

Lent is traditionally a time of study, reflection, and the taking on of a spiritual discipline that will help us understand God and ourselves more deeply, that will help us understand and experience the deeper meaning of our Lord's last week with his disciples: his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the meal he shared in the Upper Room, his time in the Garden of Gethsemane, his crucifixion and his resurrection. Our United Parishes of Southborough Lenten series this year, which begins this coming Tuesday, is focusing on just these themes, as we also do in our Maundy Thursday Service of Tenebrae. I hope you all attend both of these.

In our Sunday worship during the liturgical season of Lent we will focus on the traditional Lenten practice of "giving up." Many people observe the custom or spiritual discipline of giving up something for Lent. You might give up cigarettes if you smoke, alcoholic beverages if you drink too much, desserts if you weigh more than you should (I am speaking hypothetically here), or some recreational expenditure of money if your use of money does not always evidence a sensitive stewardship of your gifts and your empathy for those who have much less.

In some religious traditions the focus shifted from giving up something to taking on something, for example in the setting aside of money in Lenten envelopes for the support of a special mission. Setting aside time to pray, study, or participate in a program such as the United Parishes Lenten series fall into this category. In our own church at our International Pot-Luck Supper, which will take place March 11, Mattie Cummings will be talking with us about the crushing burdens that the people of Haiti carry and about the mission that she started there, a mission that we as a church support.

Let us return to the practice of giving up something for Lent. As Meister Eckhart said, "Spirituality is a matter of less, not more." What does Meister Eckhart mean by this? Over the next few weeks we will explore this theme. We will look at what it means to simplify our lives. We will look at those psychological or religious dynamics that have come to occupy the Center, the spot that should be filled by our relationship with God. We will try to take an honest look at our lives, at what we need, and at what those around us need, that we might re-orient ourselves in preparation for the new life that is promised to us in the experience of Easter.

"Giving up" is a central theme of Christianity and also Buddhism, where it is more commonly referred to as "letting go." Buddhism tells us that suffering arises as a result of our attachments, our grasping. In order to eliminate suffering in our lives and in the world we need to identify that to which we are attached, that which we seek to grasp or control, and learn to let this go. Buddhism teaches that an open hand is more powerful than a closed fist.

I believe this is a central theme of Jesus' life and teaching. As we reflect on the act of giving up throughout this Lenten season, we will hopefully be able to identify and let go of that which holds us back from the experience of Easter, from the experience of new life in Christ.

The central dynamic underlying all our attachments, all our grasping, is the matter of self-centeredness. This is the root of our own suffering and the suffering we inflict upon others. Our self-centeredness needs to be replaced by Christ-centeredness. The apostle Paul tells us that we need to die to the old self to be reborn into the new life that is offered to us by Christ.

Our scripture lesson challenges us to give up something precious. It calls us to give up the illusions we have of ourselves. It calls us to give up the illusion that we do not live in sin, that we do not need to repent, that we do not need God's forgiveness. This illusion creates a barrier that separates us from the deepest parts of ourselves, from our brothers and sisters, and from that God who is the source of all life. John challenges us to give up this illusion.

John begins his letter with a Christian manifesto; his purpose is to proclaim the message of the reality of God revealed in Christ. John attempts to combat the heresies that were plaguing the early church. He attempts to confront these "alternative gospels" with the witness of those who actually walked with Jesus, those who heard his message concerning the word of life. John tells us that eternal life involves fellowship with God and also with our brothers and sisters.

Because love can be lived only in relationship, the goal of Christian community is to make God's love manifest in our lives and in the world.

John tells us that since God is light, a Christian must walk in the light. To walk in the light does not mean to hold a certain set of beliefs. To walk in the light is to walk with God. When we are in God's presence, God's presence shines a light on our life; it shows us who we are. The light of God's presence and Word both calls and enables us to move forward into fullness of life.

To walk this path requires honesty, the acknowledgement and confession of our sin. As we recently discussed in our Sunday morning Bible study, sin is not simply a matter of thinking, saying, or doing bad things. The Greek word *'harmartia*, which is usually translated as "sin," really means "missing the mark." We sin when we are not living our life out of its true Center. To walk in darkness, then, is to refuse to acknowledge our brokenness and our need for healing. The path of darkness leads to complacency and pride, to the self-centeredness that makes our lives small and inflicts needless suffering upon those around us.

John's letter was meant to serve as a counter to the Gnostic heresy of denying the reality of sin. This heresy has its counterpart in every age. We may avoid confronting the painful truth about ourselves by rationalizing our actions, by explaining them away psychologically, by projecting our shadow onto others, or by silencing the voice of our conscience.

The psychoanalyst Karl Menninger, in the 1970's, was so exasperated with this trend that he wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* His book echoed the testimony of literary giants throughout the ages: Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Milton, and Hawthorne, writers who underscored the reality of evil and of sin in our lives. We are not being true to our heritage or to the realities of life if we hesitate to use this term in relation to the tragic series of events which are unfolding in Syria, in Yemen, and in the racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia that is being not only expressed but also acted out in very cruel and frightening ways in our country.

It is not surprising that many people are resistant to the process of self-examination of which John speaks, to the conduct of a searching and fearless moral inventory. It is interesting that the name for this process, for Step 4 in Alcoholics Anonymous is Truth. If those who would prefer to take other people's inventories rather than their own can but silence their critics, those

who would hold up a mirror to their actions, they can continue their self-serving walk in darkness.

In our own country and around the world the press, the independent news media can play the crucial role of critic in relation to democratic government. This is why all fascist dictators experience the media as not only annoying but also as an enemy, and why they seek to silence or control it. This is why freedom of the press, a First Amendment right, is built into our Constitution.

This is why Darlene and I support the Boston Globe through our subscription. Without their honest reporting of the news and the investigative reporting of their Spotlight Team in their uncovering of the clergy sex scandal and their documentation of corruption within our state government, these things might never come to light. I believe an independent news media is not a political issue; it is a basic value. It is fundamental to who we are as a democratic nation. As Thomas Jefferson said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

While confession may be painful, and it will be if we do it properly, if we conduct a searching and fearless moral inventory, it should not be degrading. It is not meant to break us down or convince us that we are nothing but “miserable sinners in the hands of an angry God.” John tells us that when our confession is insightful, truthful, and sincere, we will receive forgiveness and cleansing. To ask God’s help in restoring us to health and wholeness is an act of wisdom, an act of strength, and is the beginning of new life in Christ.

John contrasts the fruits of walking in the light with the fruits of walking in darkness. Darkness brings anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, and meaninglessness. When we lie, we substitute falsehood in thought and speech for truth. We create and live in an illusion, a false world, a false reality, and we seek to draw others into this world. When we do not acknowledge our sin, we lie to ourselves; we deceive ourselves and give evidence that the truth is not in us. John warns against the self-righteousness that shows that God’s word is not in us.

Our scripture lesson frames the basis for our spiritual life, for our relationships, and for the formation of Christian community. When we walk in the light, we enter into fellowship with

one another. This is true of nations as well as individuals. God's light revealed in Christ can deliver us from the curse of racial pride and national self-righteousness.

The pastor asked a question to the children during the children's message. "If all the good people were white and all the bad people were black, what color would you be?" A little girl replied, "Pastor, I'd be streaky!" So would the pastor, and the pope, and our president.

John tells us:

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

This morning, on the first Sunday in Lent, as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and especially as we join in both our communal and our personal prayers of confession at the beginning of this service, let us think about giving up. Let us give up the illusion that we are without sin that we might enter into honest fellowship with God and with one another. Let us give up our self-centeredness that it might be replaced with Christ-centeredness. Let us leave the darkness of unconscious living to walk in the light of God's word.

And let us walk in fellowship with Christ and in loving, compassionate fellowship with all of our brothers and sisters in this country and around the world.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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