

LENT - CHOOSING THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE

(03/03/19)

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:24-33, 44-48

“The kingdom of heavens is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matthew 13:44)

This past week, as we approach the season of Lent a time of reflection and discernment, I recalled a bumper sticker that I first saw several years ago. It read: “Don’t let your pursuit of the good things in life distract you from your search for the best things.”

This coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, is the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent. The season of Lent, the time set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter, is forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Our word “Lent” 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.

It would be circumspect of us to remember that the word which we use to designate this season of the ecclesiastical year doesn’t quite fit the experience of our brothers and sisters in the Southern Hemisphere, who are not now entering into the season of spring. The designation of a universal liturgical season on the basis of European custom is an example of the Eurocentric bias of the Christian church.

We witnessed this Eurocentric phenomenon nineteen years ago when those of us who reckon time according to the Gregorian calendar, which is only one of many earthly calendars, a reckoning of time that was set up from our earthly perspective with a day designated as the time it takes for our earth to rotate on its axis and a year the time it takes for our earth to revolve around our sun, celebrated the millennium. We assumed that the Gregorian calendar, established by Pope Gregory in 1582, was the true designation of time not only for our entire planet, but *for the entire universe*, and that New Year’s Eve 2000 would usher in either the Golden Age of the Kingdom of God or Armageddon, the fiery end of the universe. Silly us!

Easter day is the most important day of the church year. The Resurrection is the focal point of the Christian faith, like a keystone supporting an arch. Without the keystone, the edifice is shaky. We also need to remember that Easter is not just one day,

but a season of celebration that begins on Easter Day and extends for fifty days to Pentecost. Easter is the oldest festival of the church year. In fact, every Sunday could be seen as a “little Easter,” a day of celebration and never a day of fasting (not even during Lent).

In the early years of the church, in recognition of the special nature of Easter, Christians moved their day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday to Sunday, the day of Jesus’ Resurrection. There was no observance of Good Friday. I find that interesting, especially in light of those religious traditions that make Jesus’ crucifixion, his sacrifice, the Atonement the central focus of their faith. For the first few centuries, the focus during Holy Week was totally on Easter Day. Christians met for worship on the evening before Easter, what we know as the Easter vigil, and continued in fasting, prayer, and meditation until early Easter morning, when they celebrated the Eucharist.

In later centuries, the fasting of the Easter Vigil was extended to include Good Friday, thus setting aside a period of forty hours to commemorate the time Jesus’ body lay in the tomb. Later still, the period of fasting was extended to include all of Holy Week. By the year 600 C.E. the fast was extended to the forty days prior to Easter (not including Sundays), a time that corresponds to the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness. This Lenten season became a time for the final preparation for catechumens, those seeking membership in the church by profession of faith and baptism. Catechumens, who had been receiving instruction for two years, underwent a period of concentrated preparation just before Easter.

In time, not just the catechumens or new members but many other church members as well voluntarily undertook forty days of penitence and fasting for their own self-discipline. After this period of reflection on the meaning and significance of their baptism, they joined with the catechumens at Easter in a renewal of their baptismal vows. We can see from these rituals that in the days of the early church, people were baptized as adults, not infants.

The liturgical color throughout Lent is purple, indicating a time of repentance. Some churches use a deep red on Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday. In some churches, the cross is veiled in black on Good Friday. “Alleluias” are traditionally omitted from hymns and prayers during Lent in order to make the joyful alleluias of

Easter more meaningful. In churches that change the decorations and banners in their sanctuary throughout the year, Lent is one of these times of changes. In some churches, flowers are not used in the sanctuary during Lent. Candlesticks and crosses may be changed from the regular silver or brass to simple wood. During Lent our chancel is graced by a simple wooden cross draped with purple fabric.

Of all the seasons of the church year, Lent has probably been the most abused. It has too often become a superficial custom focusing on empty abstinence from tidbits of affluence. It has too often involved a morbid indulging in the gloom of self-denial against which Jesus warned. We need to rediscover Lent's rich tradition each year! The purpose of Lenten rituals is to deepen our spirituality through prayer and reflection, through setting aside the things of the world that consume us (or which we consume to our detriment). It is a time to reflect on what it would mean to walk the Jerusalem path, the path that Jesus walked. It is a time of reflection and discernment.

In our communion meditation the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday, I would like us to reflect on our lives from the perspective of Lent. I would like us to think about that bumper sticker: "Don't let your pursuit of the good things in life distract you from your search for the best things."

What are the *good things in life*? When I first saw the bumper sticker, I thought about worldly possessions. I thought about things like a big house, a fancy car, a summer home on the beach, a fancy yacht, and an expensive watch. This is what many of us regard as the "good things in life." From this perspective, the "best things" would be the parts of our life that are more people-oriented--like our family, our friends, our church, our outreach to others.

However, as I drove along, I began to think about the many good things we do every day as the "good things." When we make our contribution to our family, when we help each other, when we take time to listen, when we engage in an occupation that makes a contribution to our society, those are good things. I think of what I do in my teaching, in my counseling, and in my parish ministry as good things. From this perspective, then, what would the "best things" be?

The best things would have to be our own religious faith, our own relationship with God, our own spiritual journey.

Jesus uses three slightly different metaphors in this morning's scripture lesson to help us understand the kingdom or realm or experience of heaven. In the first, he encourages us to separate the weeds from the wheat. If we follow this directive for our Lenten discipline, we will try to identify and eliminate those parts of our life that are hurtful, that are unhealthy, those parts of us that betray our deeper values. There are certain behaviors, patterns of behavior, ways of thinking or feeling that we could very well give up, not only for Lent, but forever! We would be giving up the bad things in our life, the weeds, so there would be more room for the good.

In the second set of metaphors, Jesus tells us we need to distinguish the best things of life from the good things. He speaks of the treasure hidden in the field, the treasure which is so valuable that the person finding it sells everything he/she has and buys that field. He tells us of the pearl of great price, the pearl which is so valuable that the person finding it sells everything he/she owns to buy that pearl. If we follow this directive for our Lenten discipline, we will try to focus on the best things in life instead of the good things. If there is a meaning to life and to our life, and if this meaning of life is tied to our relationship with God, to our spiritual journey, and to the shaping of our soul, then these are the best things that we need to make sure we don't forget.

In the third set of metaphors, Jesus tells us that the way to bring about the kingdom of heaven isn't only to eliminate the bad or unhealthy parts of our life, nor is it totally tied to sacrificing the good for the best. The kingdom of heaven can be thought of as something very small and not particularly valuable, at least at first. It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds, which can grow and become a mighty tree (or at least a very large shrub). It is like yeast, an ingredient which, although used in small portion, is transformative; it is necessary for the dough to become bread. The yeast causes the dough to expand; it makes the loaf rise. If we follow this directive for our Lenten discipline, we will try to find and to plant this seed in our lives, that our lives might become what they are meant to be. This little seed is our religious faith, and it is planted and watered through our Sunday worship and our own personal prayer.

The season of Lent is a time of reflection and discernment. We *do* need to identify the unhealthy parts of our lives, the parts that should be weeded out and thrown away. We *do* need to strengthen the good things that we do in life, for these are very

important. We need to continually reexamine our values and priorities so that there is room for the very best things in life: our religious faith, our relationship with God, and our spiritual journey.

In the quiet of our communion service, we ask God to plant the seed that will grow within us, the yeast that will leaven every part and every moment of our life.

Let us enter into this Lenten process of reflection and discernment as we receive and then share the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the sacrament of sacred presence this morning.

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