

LENT #1: GIVING UP OUR ILLUSIONS

(02/26/2023)

Scripture Lesson: 1 John 1:1-10
Matthew 7:1-5

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

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"
(Matthew 7:3)

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.

This year, in our Sunday worship, we will focus on a quote by the 13th century German mystic Meister Eckhart, whom we will be studying in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group. Meister Eckhart has said, "Spirituality is a matter of less, not more." What does he mean when he says, "Spirituality is a matter of less, not more?"

Eckhart's quote reminds me of a Zen Buddhist teaching. One of the metaphors Zen uses for enlightenment, for the living of a full and meaningful life, comes from the kitchen (which may be why I like it). Zen masters call a life that is lived fully and completely, with nothing held back, "the supreme meal." A person who lives such a life, a person who knows how to plan, cook, serve, appreciate, and share the supreme meal of life to others, is called a Zen cook.

Bernard Glassman and Rick Fields, in their book *Instructions to the Cook*, expand on this metaphor when they tell us,

Cooking, like life, is about transformation. When we cook, we work directly with the elemental forces of fire and heat, water, meal, and clay. We put the lid on the pot and wait for the fire to transform the rice, or we mix the bread with yeast and put it in the oven to bake. There is something hidden, almost magical about it.

This kind of transformation involves a certain amount of faith. We work hard to prepare the food. We wash the rice, knead the bread, and break the eggs. We measure the ingredients carefully. We mix, stir, blend. But then we have to wait. We have to let fire and water transform the food we've prepared.

But we also have to keep an eye on things. We have to be aware of what is going on. . . . The accomplished Zen cook is something of an alchemist. He or she can transform poisons into virtues.

The Zen cook doesn't do this by adding a secret ingredient, but by leaving something out. The Zen cook leaves out our attachment to the self.

This beautiful little metaphor reminds me of Jesus' teachings. Jesus, Buddhism, and Eckhart all seem to say that "spirituality is a matter of less, not more." It is often what we leave out that is of the greatest importance.

Within the Christian tradition, this teaching found expression in 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, of course, 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 compassion for those who have much less.

Not to brag, but I am ahead of the curve this year in my observance of the Lenten spiritual practice of giving up. Last month I participated in the observance of "Dry January," a relatively new abstinence movement. When I heard this practice described as "Lent for millennials," I knew it was speaking to me! And so, I drank nothing but dry martinis, dry white wine, and dry sherry for the entire month. I'm not exactly sure how this enriched my spiritual life, but at least I gave it a try!

Seriously, though I am not a heavy drinker, observing Dry January made me aware of the ubiquitous presence of alcohol in our lives. If you are at a social gathering and you don't drink, people assume that you are either pregnant or in recovery (and I am neither). This past month, when Darlene and I would get together with other couples at their house and the host would ask me what I would like to drink, it felt awkward to say that I would prefer a ginger ale to a nice cold beer because I was getting a head start on Lent. I didn't want our host to get the impression that I was a religious fanatic.

I finally decided to say that to be perfectly honest, I am abstaining from alcoholic beverages because I'm a gym rat and I'm in serious training. (That's interesting--when I described myself as a gym rat, as someone in serious training, it was noticeable that you responded with more smiles, chuckles, and dare I say, derisive laughter than usual. (Maybe now you can see why I have such low self-esteem!))

Okay. Like Representative George Santos, I may have embellished my work-out routine just a little (basically by implying that I have a work-out routine). But that's not the point. 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 perhaps even read the Bible* (God forbid!) fall into this

category. Giving a little extra to one of our missions or to disaster funds for the people whose lives have been devastated by the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria would also qualify.

Taking our cue from Meister Eckhart, over the next few weeks we will look at what it means to give something up, and we will attempt to discern what it is that we need to give up. We will look at those psychological or religious dynamics that have taken up residence in our true 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 ours through the experience of Easter.

“Giving up” is a central theme of Christianity and of Buddhism, where it is more commonly referred to as “letting go.” Buddhism tells us that suffering, first for ourselves and then, secondarily for others, arises through and because of our attachments, our grasping. 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. It teaches that the meal prepared by a Zen cook is special, not because of what it includes, but what it leaves out—our attachment to ourselves, to our egocentric way of processing life.

We touched on this a few weeks ago when I suggested that when we are struggling with suicidal impulses, our death urge is normal, natural, and healthy. There is, in fact, something that needs to die for new life to emerge. Our true center, the part of us that calls us to individuate, to self-actualize, to be the unique incarnation of God’s creative spirit that we are called to be, is calling us to identify what it is within us or in our relationship with the outside world that needs to die, and then, *symbolically*, kill it off. This is why people so often have dreams where they die or someone who is an important part of their life dies. These are hints that something needs to change.

This psychological or spiritual discipline calls us to identify and then let go of something that is causing suffering for us and probably for others. If we commit what is called “the concretistic fallacy,” we may believe it is our body that needs to die, when this is not the case. By the way, I believe that this way of thinking might have helped the mother in Duxbury who killed her three children and then tried to take her own life, or the father in Andover who killed his wife, his son, and then himself. I suspect that there was, indeed, something that needed to die in both people, but it was not their spouses, their children, and themselves. Or, of course, we could look at what these two people experienced as a chemical imbalance in their brains.

The spiritual discipline of letting go is a central theme of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God. 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.

The First Letter of John 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, that we do not need to grow, to individuate. This illusion that our life is not being lived off-center 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 God's revelation in Jesus Christ. John tells us that eternal life involves fellowship with God and 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. That's really important--because love can be lived, can be experienced only in relationship, the goal of Christian community is to make God's love manifest in our lives and in the world. And that's what we do, what we try to do in this little church.

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 orthodox beliefs. It also doesn't mean to live a perfect life, to never do anything stupid, irresponsible, or bad. To walk in the light is to walk with God. When we are in God's presence, that presence shines a light on our life; it shows us who we are. The light of God's presence and Word calls and enables us to experience fullness of life.

To walk this path requires honesty, the acknowledgement and confession of our sin. Sin is not simply a matter of thinking, saying, or doing bad things. The Greek word *'hamartia*, which is usually translated as "sin," 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 smaller, not bigger, and inflicts needless suffering upon those around us. To walk in darkness also means to live our life with no awareness of God's presence in our lives, no experience of God's healing, guiding love.

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. Jung tells us that the hard work of identifying and integrating our shadow is a moral issue.

The psychoanalyst Karl Menninger, in the 1970's, was so exasperated with the modern tendency to deny sin and identify with only what is in consciousness, 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 crimes against humanity that are taking place in Ukraine, in the barbaric treatment of civilian women and children in South Sudan, and in the racism, anti-Semitism, hatred of Asians, homophobia, and transphobia that is being not only verbally expressed and written into law in some states, but also acted out in cruel and frightening ways.

It is not surprising that many people resist engaging in the process of self-examination of which John speaks, that they are reluctant to engage in the conduct of a searching and fearless moral inventory. It is interesting that the 4th Principle in Alcoholics Anonymous is Courage. It requires courage for us to take our own moral inventory; it is much easier to focus on the shortcomings of others. It is easier to see the speck in our neighbor's eye, and judge it, than to see the log that is in our own eye. If those who prefer to take other people's inventories rather than their own can avoid looking in a mirror, they can continue their supposedly self-serving, but actually self-defeating walk in darkness.

In our own country and around the world the press, the independent news media can play the crucial role of critic, of truth-teller in relation to government. This is the reason why fascist dictators view the media as an enemy, and why they seek to silence or control it. Freedom of the press, a First Amendment right, is built into our Constitution. 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, while a fearless and searching moral inventory may be painful, it should not be degrading. It is not meant to break us down or convince us that we are nothing but what the evangelist Jonathan Edwards called "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. Jung tells us that the integration of our shadow makes us whole. 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, an alternative reality, and we seek to draw others into this world. Narcissistic people, by the way, are particularly good at this, which is why their children are so often confused, even as adults. 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 experience 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, of white supremacy, 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.

The writer of the three letters of 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, let us think about giving up. Let us give up the illusion that we are without sin that we might experience 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 our brothers and sisters in this country and around the world.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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An audio copy of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.