

LENT #2: GIVING UP OUR ATTACHMENTS

(03/05/2023)

Scripture Lesson: 1 Timothy 6:6-10
Matthew 19:16-26
Luke 16:13-15

"For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." (1 Timothy 6:10)

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

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. As I mentioned last week, 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. Lent is forty days and six Sundays, not forty-six days. There are several reasons why it was set up this way.

The number forty is an archetypal number; it is imprinted deep in the human psyche. It appears frequently in the Bible, usually in conjunction with some special event. God caused it to rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights, so the number forty is associated with the destruction of the existing structure in order that new life might emerge. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, so forty is associated with the process of individuation, of forging a new identity through experiencing a time of hardship.

Moses spent forty days on Mt. Sinai in the presence of the Lord when he first received the tablets of the Law, and then another forty days when he returned to the mountain to make new tablets to replace the ones he smashed in anger. Elijah, fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel, journeyed forty days and forty nights to Mt. Horeb. Jonah told the people of Nineveh that if they did not repent, in forty days their city would be overthrown. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness immediately following his baptism. Once again, this number is used to denote or symbolize a wilderness experience that becomes a significant turning point in someone's life.

Since several of these biblical references have to do with fasting, I would remind you that Sundays are technically not a part of Lent. The Sundays during Lent are Sundays "in" Lent, not Sundays "of" Lent. Now you may think this distinction of no great significance, but it does have implications for our coffee hour. Since today is technically not one of the days of Lent, we can eat desserts at our coffee hour and still be theologically correct! Of course, this assumes that we aspire to be theologically correct, and it also assumes we are giving up sweets for Lent--two big assumptions, especially for this church (and for its pastor)!

As I mentioned last week, letting go is a central theme in Buddhism. The Buddha taught that suffering arises as a consequence of two forces: ignorance and grasping. If we wish 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 control, and learn to let this go. If we can do this, we will discover something deeper. This is also a central theme of Jesus' life and teaching.

As illustrated in this morning's scripture lesson, the central dynamic underlying our attachments, our grasping is self-centeredness. Self-centeredness is the root of our suffering and the suffering we inflict upon others. Self-centeredness needs to be replaced by Christ-centeredness. The apostle Paul tells us that we need to die to the old self to experience the new life, the resurrected life that is offered to us by Christ and in Christ.

Last week we talked about seeing through and giving up the illusions we have of ourselves. We also need to give up the illusions, the false pictures we have of others. This is not easy to do. "There are none so blind as those who will not see." Scripture tells us that if the truth is in us, we will not only see ourselves clearly; we will see others clearly. We will see others and ourselves through the eyes of God, through the eyes of Jesus.

Lent calls us to give up our prejudices. If we give up our prejudices, we will discover other people because we will not longer view them through a distorted lens. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenged his people's prejudice against Samaritans. When Jesus raised up the prostitute, he not only helped his followers to see her as a child of God; *he helped her to see herself as a child of God*. When we see people through Jesus' eyes, our prejudices against those of a different race, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, or religion fade away. We discover that we are all brothers and sisters since we are all children of God.

This morning I would like us to think about our possessions as one of our possible attachments. In one sense, it is easy to preach against the evils of excessive wealth. However, when we look at this part of our lives through the lens of attachment, the matter becomes more complex. How do we as a nation know when our use of the world's resources becomes sinful? How do we know when our wealth becomes an attachment, when our grasping brings suffering on ourselves and then on others?

In Sunday school, I was told that money is the root of all evil. I was told that this was a saying of Jesus. I later realized that Jesus not only didn't say this; Jesus didn't say very much about money. He didn't make a practice of attacking the rich. Jesus focused more on the relationship we have with money, the relationship we have with material possessions. I also discovered that my Sunday school teacher's quote of this biblical saying was not accurate in a significant way. In the First Letter of Paul to his disciple Timothy (chapter 6, verse 10), Paul writes,

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

Money is not the root of evil. The *love of money* is the root of evil. Money is neither good nor evil. It can be used in harmful ways, and it can bring blessing to others. For example, in our recent mission offering to Tibet Aid we helped provide financial support for Tenzin Norzin, a Tibetan refugee child who lives in northern India. For only \$360 a year we help her obtain an education that affirms her Tibetan language, culture, and religion. We can do this with the money we have at our disposal; in fact, we could do it for ten children--*if we wanted*. Because of what we have, we can make a significant difference in the lives of little children; we can make the world a better place.

Material possessions are not the problem. Our *attachment* to material possessions is the problem. Paul tells us that in our eagerness to be rich we wander away from the faith, from the true center of our life, and we “pierce ourselves with many pains.” This is what the Buddha was referring to when he said that our attachments bring suffering both to ourselves and to others.

One of my favorite Zen masters, Charlotte Joko Beck, in her book *Everyday Zen* has written:

The process of practice [actually, any spiritual discipline of renunciation] is to see through, not to eliminate anything to which we are attached. We could have great financial wealth and be unattached to it, or we might have nothing and be very attached to having nothing. Usually, if we have seen through the nature of attachment, we will tend to have fewer possessions, but not necessarily. Most [Zen] practice [most spiritual practice] gets caught in this area of fiddling with the environment of our minds. “My mind should be quiet.” Our mind doesn’t matter; what matters is nonattachment to the activities of the mind. And our emotions are harmless unless they dominate us (that is, if we are attached to them)—then they create disharmony for everyone. The first problem in practice is to see that we are attached. As we do consistent, patient zazen, we begin to know that we are nothing but attachments; they rule our lives.

But we never lose an attachment by saying it has to go. Only as we gain awareness of its true nature does it quietly and imperceptibly wither away, like a sandcastle with waves rolling over; it just smooths out and finally—where is it? What was it? (p. 188)

Next to my reading chair in my study at home is a human skull. Next to it are two little toy figures, one of Ken and one of Barbie. The skull and these two figures are a reminder to me not to be attached to physical beauty (which, incidentally, has never been a problem for me), but also not to be too attached to life itself. The time will come (hopefully later rather than sooner) when I will have to “see through” the form that I know as myself, when I will need to embrace the reality, the truth of impermanence, not in despair, but with faith that following the dissolution

of this body, I will enter even more fully into the Mystery that I am trying to not only understand but embrace in this life.

I don't want to set aside this life, my pursuit of pleasure, all I enjoy; I just want to see through them; I want to see them for what they are. As Charlotte Joko Beck has said,

The question is not how to get rid of our attachments or to renounce them; it's the intelligence of seeing their true nature, impermanent and passing, empty.

Charlotte doesn't say this, but I believe what this teaching applies to suffering as well; we need to "see through it." It also applies to our religious beliefs or "truths." The Dalai Lama tells us that our religious beliefs, dogmas, doctrines, etc., are among the most difficult attachments for us to let go, to see through.

If we love money, wealth, or material possessions, if we are attached to them, we will never have enough. Scrooge McDuck is a good example of this truth; he has rooms full of gold coins, but he never spends any of it. The love of money leads to selfishness. It leads to hoarding. Jesus tells us that that which we hoard invariably becomes our master. He tells us we cannot serve two masters, that we "cannot serve God and wealth." Luke tells us that the Pharisees, "who were lovers of money," ridiculed this teaching. The Pharisees' love of money closed their ears to Jesus' teaching about how our attachment to wealth can prevent us from entering the kingdom of God.

Far be it for me to pick on right-wing Republicans, to judge them, but I believe this fundamental Christian/Buddhist truth was illustrated in a news item printed in the Washington Post this past week. Apparently, experts had just testified before Alaskan lawmakers about the widespread, long-term harm of child abuse on the child and on society. In questioning one of the experts, Republican state Representative David Eastman zeroed in on a "possible benefit" to child abuse when he asked one of the experts,

How would you respond to the argument that I have heard on occasion where, um, in the case where the child abuse is fatal, obviously it's not good for the child, but it's actually a benefit to society because there aren't needs for government services and whatnot over the whole course of that child's life?

I agree with Representative Eastman when he notes that beating a child to death is "not good for the child," is not in the child's best interest, but when he suggests that when an abused child is beaten to death, it is in the best interests of the taxpayer, I believe he is more attached to his wealth than he is to human life.

I don't know much about state Representative Eastman, but I do not believe that he hates children in general. He might even love his own children if he has any. What he said reminds me of something the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said many years ago, "The opposite of love is not hate; it's indifference." If I were inclined to judge, which of course I'm not, I would suggest that Eastman loves money but is indifferent to the plight of abused or abandoned children. The rest of us ask, how can you not love an abandoned or an abused child; how can your heart not go out to this little, helpless incarnation of God's creative Spirit? Elie Wiesel may be right; the opposite of love may be indifference.

By the way, lest you form a distorted picture of the Alaskan legislature by viewing it through the eyes of a confessed progressive, Eastman's colleagues called his remarks "despicable," "atrocious," and "indefensible." Last week, the Alaska House of Representatives voted 35-1 to censure Eastman for his remarks. Apparently, Eastman is not troubled by a tendency to self-reflection; he is not inclined to take a searching and fearless moral inventory, for he was the only lawmaker who voted against the motion to censure.

Several years ago, our daughter Kristen worked as a clinical psychologist in the Anxiety Disorders Clinic at the Institute of Living in Hartford. One of the groups of people whom the Anxiety Disorders Clinic serves is people who have been diagnosed with hoarding disorder. According to Kristen, this is a difficult population with which to work. Their attachment to things, even totally meaningless and valueless trash, is so strong that they absolutely cannot let these things go, even if it means losing their family and possibly even their life. I doubt that this is a matter of their love for these possessions. The possessions have taken on some special meaning for the person. I simply use it to illustrate the demonic power that material possessions can have over us. Our attachment to them can literally lead to our death.

There is nothing wrong with living well. I live well. I live in a beautiful house. I don't have much saved for my retirement because I'm not planning to retire (this elicited a combination of cheers and groans), but I suspect I will always have enough money to do the things I want. Darlene and I were able to help our parents and send our children to college. If I want to go on another pilgrimage to Tibet, I can do this (theoretically). My wife and I have worked hard for what we have. Nothing has been handed to us. I don't feel the least bit guilty for enjoying a high standard of living.

Yet the challenge of Jesus is always there. Jesus tells us to examine our priorities. He tells us that where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. Where do we cross the line? If we spend \$75 on dinner in a nice restaurant and then give \$10 a week to the church and nothing to missions, isn't something wrong? Or perhaps it isn't wrong. Perhaps it just throws a light on our true rather than our professed values. It is what it is.

A Hindu wise man once said, “If you have more stuff at age fifty than you had at age forty, there is something wrong with your spiritual life.” He didn’t say that if you have more stuff at age thirty than you had at age twenty there is something wrong with your spiritual life. We should have more stuff at age thirty than we did at age twenty. In the first half of life, we should establish ourselves in a profession, buy a house, and accumulate material possessions.

However, as most of us know, the stuff we have becomes increasingly less significant as we grow older. If I set my sights on having more money, more investments, more houses, more boats at age ninety than I have at age eighty, and if I devote my energies to this end, I will have missed the meaning of life. Wealth will have become an attachment. If I do not identify it and give it up, it will cause suffering not only for me but also for those in the world who have much less than I.

Hoarding is self-centered. Sharing is God-centered. The rich young man in our scripture lesson was self-centered. He did not want to share what he had with others. Because of his attachments, his grasping, though he was living a highly moral life, he missed the opportunity to follow Jesus. If there was ever an example of an attachment that cost a man his soul, this is it!

By the way, hoarding books does not fall into this category. Hoarding books is ok, because you never know when you are going to need the information in one of them. Especially if you preach in a top shelf church and have a large on-line following!

Success and the wealth that accompanies it has become the false god, the idol, of our culture. Material possessions have moved into a central part of our lives. I am amazed at how much money people spend on security systems for their houses. Our attachment to material possessions arises when there is a vacuum in the center. It happens when we mistake the outer treasure for the inner treasure.

The parable of the treasure hidden in the field tells us there is a treasure, a spiritual treasure that is hidden deep within us. We need to find this treasure and build our lives around it. If we are unable to find the treasure of which Jesus speaks, our inner spiritual treasure will be projected onto outer treasure. When this happens, gold, silver, or money take on a numinous energy. We hoard them. I think this is the reason why, in so many religions, the seeker is advised to live in poverty. If we let go of our search for outer gold, we may find the true gold within, the gold that the alchemists assure us is “not the common gold.”

Lent challenges us to think about what we really need. If we discover what we need, we can give up or share whatever is left over with those who have so little.

There is a story concerning the ancient Zen Buddhist master, Ryokan. Ryokan lived a simple life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One night, when he was away, a thief broke into the hut only to discover that the Zen master had nothing that he could steal.

Ryokan returned and encountered the burglar. “You have gone to much trouble to visit me,” he said. “You must not go away empty handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.” The thief, bewildered, took Ryokan’s clothes, and slunk off.

Ryokan sat down naked in meditation and peacefully watched the moon rising over the top of the mountain. “Poor fellow,” he thought to himself. “I wish I could give him this gorgeous moon!”

How can you steal from someone who needs so little? How can you steal from someone when his treasure lies in his appreciation of the beauty that surrounds him, the beauty of a moon rising over the top of a mountain? Material possessions meant little to Ryokan or to Jesus because *they had the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field!* When we have this treasure, we might be surprised how little else we need!

When we have this treasure, the pearl of great price, we will discover that it becomes even more valuable to us when we give it away, when we share it with others.

This Lenten season, let us replace our self-centeredness with Christ-centeredness, with God-centeredness. Let us give up our illusions that we might experience fellowship with God and with one another. Let us give up our attachment to success, wealth, comfort and security, our grasping for material possessions that we might share what we have with others and with life.

If we can do this, we will journey through this Lenten season in fellowship with Christ and with each other. Let us open our hearts to this fellowship as we gather around this table to share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
March 5, 2023*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on the church website later this week.