

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of light and God of darkness, nothing evades your sight. You know who we are, from our coming into the world to our twilight. You know the places where we are willing to serve and the places where we find service to you to be inconvenient. Help us God, in all seasons of our lives, to faithfully name those roadblocks, those places of ease, those places of faithlessness. Let us not settle for small growths but to fully take hold of how you would call us to be authentic to the calling you consistently lay out to us, eternal one.

The seasons of our lives have their peaks and their valleys, and we venture into one of the valleys of the church's life. Today we recognize one season that is difficult to live into, that of Lent. In it, we walk into darkness and take a good look at who we are and what we are called to be in this world. As we traverse this difficult path, guide us with grace and mercy to set aside our bindings, whatever they may be, and seek you with the utmost reverence. Guide us how best to serve in our fasting, our prayer, and our almsgiving, that these recognitions may not be ends in themselves but lead us to grasp more each year what it means to be a follower, and not an onlooker. Let these paths of devotion be a means to further growth and not devotions that end with the season's turn. We pray all these things in the name of the one who teaches us even today, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Let me tell you about my day yesterday. I didn't want to work on my sermon, so I did it at about 10 pm. I played video games and watched movies the whole day. The wife wanted to do some cleaning, but eh, I didn't feel in the mood. She gave me dirty looks, but I was much too busy winning the National Title with Nebraska! I'm mostly just sitting and waiting for football. It can't come soon enough, but good thing! One week from today is the

first preseason game! In the meantime, I'll keep waiting. If I get the urge sometime this week, I might work on a sermon, but eh, whatever.

I know what you're all thinking. "His priorities are way out of whack!" Indeed, but just for your information, that wasn't my day yesterday. I completed my sermon on Friday. But while this is an extreme example, we all have a tendency to lose sight of what's really important. We can start making the smaller things in life the focus unintentionally and only find out when we have bad moments. We need occasional reorientations, and that's what our next season is for. After Epiphany, we come to the day that signals 40 days of serious reconnection with God: Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. We symbolize Lent, like Advent, with purple, for both recognize a time of anticipation as well as Christ's Royalty. Jesus' journey to the wilderness is our guide for Lent, mentioned Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days spiritual training.

We are also called to spiritual training and reorientation. According to Kathleen Mulhern in her article "Lent FAQ," there are three main practices for Lent: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Indeed, this is the outline from our reading from Matthew this week, and we take on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting with one goal in mind. "It is a time to reflect on the habits, possessions, and desires that have come between the soul and God, and to find new ways to let them go so that God can be more fully loved," Mulhern says. Today, we ask ourselves, What is separating us from God, and how can we better reorient ourselves so that God may shine? Let us dive into Lent, reorienting ourselves by engaging in faithful fasting, prayer, and almsgiving that brings us closer to our creator.

Lent, it seems, is about giving things up. So, let me tell you what I gave up for Lent last year: I gave up using my Windows computer, eating peas, cheering for the Green Bay

Packers and the Wisconsin Badgers, watching professional bowling, drinking regular soda, and reading the Twilight series. It was such a great sacrifice. I mean, I toiled day after day, and I know that sacrifice brought me closer to God and God's plan for me! Well, if you know me, you know that I'm actually don't do any of those things; it'd be super easy to give up! When we think about Lent, we often think about fasting, or temporarily giving something up. So, what's the point to give up something that has no significant meaning for us? Giving up to give up is not worthwhile. But Jesus has a particular calling with our fasting. Use anything you fast from as a means to put your own priorities in order and bring yourself closer to God.

It's different for everyone. The Eastern Church gives up all kinds of items during their fasts. The Catholic Church fasts from meat every Friday. In the Methodist church, the choice is between you and God. Whatever you choose, your choice should be what comes between you and God. I would suggest that we look very deeply at what those things are. If you're giving up chocolate because you secretly want to go on a diet plan, perhaps you might consider something else. That may be about putting that in its right place in your personal life, but it has nothing to do with growing closer to the Creator. If you're giving up coffee because you know if you don't have it, you are liable to threaten someone, you are probably on the right track. Small things can become idolatrous. In the past, I gave up diet soda, which was good, because I quickly figured out how much I drank soda without thinking. It became a crutch to me without me knowing, and giving it up showed how much that little habit was supporting me. I'm continuing, past Lent, to see how I can limit its effects on my life and always put it in the appropriate place. Indeed, Lent is the time when we seek to find how these little things in our lives fit their appropriate places.

If we look at Lent as a time when we just give things up, then we're looking at it the wrong way. We do not benefit from subtraction alone but through enriching ourselves with devotion. One of those things is a renewed sense of prayer, or putting God in the right place. It is a wonderful means of connecting with our Creator, but prayer gets twisted. So, please join me in prayer right now. "Gracious, Holy God, you know I've been faithful. I'm doing my best to serve this church and create faithful disciples. And, God, since you are so faithful to me, I really would like to ask for a new external hard drive for my computer. You know, my hard drive is getting full, and I do like to get a new movie to put on it every now and then. So, God, pour out your gracious faithfulness and bestow me with this gift that recognizes my servitude. Also, God, my wife wants a few things...if you would please get them as soon as possible, my life would be a whole lot easier. Thank you, in Christ's name, Amen." Not exactly a faithful prayer, but an easy thing to slip into. Prayer is something we should struggle with as people of faith. This vending machine prayer is really unfaithful. I put my prayer in, and out will pop the results I want. God becomes a vending machine. I get annoyed with many popular Christian evangelists that tell you that all that stands between us and the riches beyond our dreams is that we do not ask God for them. This is garbage theology. Are we going to tell children in the poorest countries they haven't prayed enough? Lent instead looks at this more seriously.

The important thing that Jesus preaches is the authentic prayer. The authentic prayer is neither what will make us sound good nor the self-centered prayer. The authentic prayer digs down to our deepest levels, asks the hard questions, and tries to understand our complicated world while seeking to be Christ's agent. This prayer includes more listening with our speaking. It is more about how it changes us than what we request of

God. Authentic prayer brings us more into communion with God. It seeks to bring us into one mindset with God with all our human frailties and questions. Jesus says quite plainly that God knows what you need before you ask it. When we pray, we seek God and what God would have for us, and then we move in the world, empowered by that spirit. God will act as God will act, and we can bring our supplications before God. Our prayer then becomes more about “God, make me the best conduit of your grace and love I can be” than “God, do this for me.” That just may be the hardest prayer we can pray, when we get down to brass tacks. Indeed, the authentic sense of prayer looks seriously at why our prayers sometimes go unanswered, why we sometimes feel like we aren’t accomplishing anything when we pray, and how we can be the best channels of love and grace. Sometimes we will feel true connection when we pray, but sometimes we may just feel angry. Lent is about grasping all of these things in our prayer lives, making them more authentic.

Fasting and prayer are excellent things to incorporate into our Lenten observation, but both of those are easily opportunities to turn inward. The Christian life must also be about going outward. Almsgiving is giving to those in need and not just giving donations. Faithful Almsgiving is charity and justice; helping those who need care directly and fixing the systems that create those who need care. The second of course is much more difficult and time-consuming than the first.

What are we giving? Sometimes the easiest or the hardest thing to give is money. I think the harder thing to give up is time. We are so governed by our schedules and to-do lists that giving of our time can be like giving up gold. About a week ago at our Visioning meeting, we were discussing several means of service, and Tawn brought up something rather groundbreaking. “How often do we just listen to one other?” she asked. And the

answer is, throughout our culture, we do not listen. We hear what someone has to say and are too quick to offer our own suggestions, our own advice and think that we have served the other. We need to engage in acts of justice and compassion, but perhaps our paths begin closer than we would think. Alms to the poor include those who are poor in things and those who are poor in human attention, kindness, and love.

In general, we want to be recognized. We want to receive praise for the work that we've done and how well we've done it. That's perfectly good and natural. The problem is when we've let our actions as human people become praiseworthy to our neighbors when we should be seeking the glory of God. That is what Jesus calls out when he discusses fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven," he says. "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." These are easy pitfalls to fall into without even realize what we're doing. But, once again, Lent is about an intentional look at ourselves across the board, and we may need to call ourselves out. Our Lent should always be focused on the greater Glory of God and how we connect with our creator. To do these things to show others is another way that we let things get out of place.

Ultimately, the Lenten season is a time to put things in their place, in all areas of our lives. Time to put the self into the right place and not overindulge. Time to put God in the right place through authentic praying. Time to put the other in the right place through faithful almsgiving. We seek to rediscover what it means to live this Christian life, for very soon, we will see how much the Christian life costs and rediscover what we sacrifice to follow Jesus Christ. Through the 40 days of Lent we remember that the path is not easy; it requires reorientation that we may walk faithfully. Thanks be to God, Amen and Amen.