

Ash Wednesday Grows Up

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009.

What are you giving up for Lent?

When I was a schoolchild, my classmates would come to school one day with a dark smudge on their foreheads and the question, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Not being a cradle Catholic or even a cradle Episcopalian or a cradle anything, I wondered about the smudge and the question, and asked my own question, *What is Lent anyway?* When I was in grade school, they gave me their best grade school theology, which was that the ashes and Lent and the giving-up are things you do to be sorry for your sins between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Beneath this theology, there was an undercurrent of other motives that I could not quite fathom. Having smudges on your forehead and figuring out what they loved enough to give up for 40 days—these are not just things you do during Lent—it is the “in” thing to do, even if they grumbled about it. And they couldn’t figure out whether they should proudly keep the smudge visible on their foreheads to show that they were pious, or wipe it off right away because Jesus said not to show off that they were pious.

As I got older, the questions and the dilemmas never seemed to change. What are you giving up for Lent? Are you going to wipe the ash off your forehead when you leave here, or leave it on? What is Lent anyway? Even when I was a child, the grade school theology stilled my questions but not my wondering, and the answers never did make much sense. What is the connection between chocolate and Ash Wednesday, fasting and Lent?

Ash Wednesday and Lent are ancient traditions with ancient customs. As with many ancient traditions, we have sometimes kept the actions but lost the reasons. When we have taken for granted the practice of Lenten disciplines such as self-denial, fasting, and extra reading of the Bible, we often turn to these practices without really being aware of what they have to do with Lent or Easter or even why we need to do them at all. What is the point of fasting? What are we supposed to accomplish? What is the point of giving up chocolate? Perhaps the question is not so much “What are you giving up for Lent?” but “Why are you giving up for Lent?” Perhaps what we need to give up for Lent this year is our grade school theology about Lent. Perhaps it is time for Ash Wednesday to grow up.

I would like to suggest that today, Ash Wednesday, we begin to see Lent as a time to move more deeply into a sacramental relationship with God. Our observances of a holy Lent—by self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial, and meditating on God’s holy Word—all of the ways we choose to observe Lent, should draw us there, into that relationship. Our practices of a Lenten life are meant to be outward signs of an inward transformation wrought by God in Jesus Christ, whose passion, death and resurrection for our salvation we will celebrate forty days from now. An “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” is how we define a sacrament, and by

grace we mean God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved. We are not fasting or denying ourselves in order to deserve our salvation, or deserve God's love. God has already forgiven us, adopted us as children of God, and made us one with him for eternal life.

So I would like to suggest that we treat our life in Lent as a sacrament, as the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace (gift) that comes from being a beloved creature of God.

One inward and spiritual gift is the gift of creation—the gift of life and of eternal life. A Lenten discipline that would be an outward or sacramental sign of this gift might be an act that affirms life. For example, we can fast from eating food that has resulted from the taking of life, or we can grow a garden, or we can offer daily prayers for healing—ways of being that affirm life.

Another inward and spiritual gift is the gift of the love of God in Christ. An outward sign of this gift might be an act that acknowledges that love by offering love, and compassion, and welcome. Feed the poor; teach a child to read; be a compassionate listener to the bore across—ways of being that offer love..

And then there is the gift of mercy. God is always merciful and slow to anger, and always faithful to us and forgiving even when we sin and draw away from God. To be a visible sign of God's mercy, devote your Lent to showing mercy, by an act of forgiveness and reconciliation, or by reaching out to someone, or by advocating for peace in the community—ways of being that show mercy.

So the first question to ask is not so much "What will you give up for Lent?" or even "What will you do for Lent?" but rather "Who will you *be* in Lent?" *Whose* will you be in Lent?

Lent is a time for us to restore a right relationship with God, so that we can be who we were created to be—God's beloved child, redeemed and reconciled to God by Jesus Christ on the cross. If we know that, down in our bones, then whatever we will do during Lent will arise naturally out of that deep, deep desire, to be God's beloved child. There is no need to tinker with Lent by adding or subtracting things, but rather treat our life as God treats it, as a sacrament and as a holy temple for God. As a sacramental vessel for God, we learn that we are both dust and a child of God, we will both die and be risen, we are both broken and beloved. In the Collect for Fridays we pray to God, "whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified..." Today may we know full well that we are dust, so that we may know with sure confidence that we will also rise with Christ in glory.