

Scriptural direction for Lenten disciplines

An Ash Wednesday reflection from Bishop Susan Haynes - February 26, 2020

In a culture that does not encourage much attention to the interior life, Lent offers us a time to focus on exactly that. During the 40 days (excluding Sundays) that lead up to Easter, Christians have an opportunity to engage in disciplines that deepen their relationship to God and to each other. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday (February 26), and we mark its beginning by receiving the sign of the cross in ashes upon our forehead. Then hopefully, for the next 40 days, we engage in a discipline that enables the deepening of our spiritual life. Many people settle easily on a Lenten discipline. Others are at a loss. If we consider the Scriptures appointed for Ash Wednesday, we are actually given some direction.



In the Gospel of Matthew for Ash Wednesday (Matthew 16:1-6, 16-21), Jesus is counseling his disciples on the need for a humble practice of personal piety. The purpose of practicing piety is to move closer to the heart of God, not to show off for fellow Christians. Jesus offers three examples of how to practice this piety. These three examples form a sturdy three-legged stool that makes a good place to sit for Lent: Alms-giving, Prayer, and Fasting.

Jesus begins by saying, “Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may be praised by others.” Notice that Jesus says, “**Whenever** you give alms...” Not, “**If** you decide to give alms...” The assumption is that alms-giving is...well...a necessary spiritual discipline that is not a matter of choice. Further it is not a discipline that is done in order to show off. In fact, the secrecy of its execution probably adds to its spiritual benefit. What kind of alms-giving will you make your Lenten discipline? Maybe a dollar a day to your favorite charity? Maybe an item a day to your local food pantry? Maybe a few minutes a day to someone who is lonely and needs your friendship? It’s not a matter of if, but when.

Jesus goes on to say, “Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.” Again, note that Jesus assumes not **if** you are going to pray but **when** you are going to pray. Christians are expected to pray, and Lenten disciplines are incomplete without some attention to prayer. And as with alms-giving, prayer is not a showy discipline but a matter between God

and the one praying. What can you do during Lent to deepen your conversation with God? And once again, not a matter of if, but when.

Finally, Jesus counsels his disciples, “Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others they are fasting.” Once again, the admonition is **when**, not **if**. The practice of self-denial helps to deepen one’s prayer life. For some people, fasting, in the earlier understandings of the word (not eating food), is medically counter-indicated. But if we think of fasting as self-denial, it can be the giving up of something upon which we have come too dependent. The point of fasting is to remind us of the source of provision for all of our needs – God alone. Some people fast from social media during Lent. Some fast from saying unkind words or engaging in gossip, disciplining themselves to put money in a jar each time they catch themselves slipping. Imagine the church deficits that could be righted with such a discipline!

The most important thing about Lenten disciplines is that they draw us more closely into the heart of Christ. The prophet Isaiah (as he talks about fasting) calls us to a spirit of humility, but also to action:

***Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)***

The kind of fasting, praying and alms-giving to which we are called is a discipline of justice and reconciliation...a kind of discipline that gives life and gives it abundantly. What is your Lenten discipline? If we engage in this discipline faithfully, listen to the promise that Isaiah foretells:

***Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in. (Isaiah 58:12)***

Can you imagine a world where ruins are rebuilt, foundations established that can be trusted, breaches repaired and streets restored? With heartfelt blessings, I wish for you a good and holy Lent, one that draws you and others closer to God.

Bishop Susan