

Second Weekend in Lent (RCL/B): "What We Gain When We Give Things Up"
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38
February 27-28, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A study from 3 years ago lists the 4 most common things people give up for Lent as:

- #1: social media (I guess they reduced or eliminated screen time) (21%)
- #2: alcohol (18%)
- #3: chocolate/sweets (13%)
- #4: soda/coffee (11%)¹

Now, we don't have to be nutritionists to realize that the less alcohol, processed sugar and caffeine we consume, the healthier we're going to be. (It just makes me wonder what's left for 7th Day Adventists to give up for Lent, since they pretty much live alcohol-free, caffeine-free, vegetarian, healthy lives all year long.) We're aware, too, of the harm caused by spending too much time on our computers and on our phones. Less screen time is also apt to make us emotionally, psychologically, even physically healthier.

True, maybe I didn't give up wine with dinner or ice cream after dinner **only** to remind myself of Jesus' suffering and loving sacrifice on the cross. Maybe I'm kinda hoping that a side effect of my Lenten "fasting" will be to shed 5 pounds before Easter. 'Doesn't make me a bad person, right?? Our motives don't have to be pure -- and that's a good thing, because they seldom are.

The article in which I read about that study is titled, "What You Gain When You Give Things Up." The author talks about how some people who aren't even religious choose to make "Lenten sacrifices," to temporarily forego certain foods, beverages or activities they enjoy, for the physical or psychological benefits they receive. He quotes a study that showed when people temporarily interrupt activities they love, then resume them, they

actually enjoy those activities **more**, because they haven't become "numb to the pleasure." He wrote, and we'll probably agree, "Absence makes the heart fonder, even for sweets."

When I've given up for Lent some food or drink I like, then reach for it out of habit, then hopefully stop myself from taking it, that tiny moment of self-denial invites me to be mindful of my Lord and grateful for his sacrifice on the cross. So, oddly enough, even the thought of Chunky Monkey ice cream can put God thoughts in my head!

The 1 sentence summary of the article, "What You Gain When You Give Things Up" is: "Voluntarily sacrificing pleasurable things resets your senses and makes you master of yourself." If something benefits us spiritually, it's going to help us overall, too. So I was interested to read how consciously denying ourselves something that we enjoy helps us get beyond what's called our "lizard brain" which seeks pleasure and avoids pain at all costs. When I choose **not** to do "what comes naturally," I'm training myself to live on a higher plane. I'm opening myself to the action of the Holy Spirit, who's always looking to bond me more closely to my Savior, who lived not for Himself, but for others, who followed not His own agenda, but His Father in Heaven's.

Now, I do have to ask myself, if I choose to drink water instead of wine with a nice Italian dinner, if I leave the pint of Chunky Monkey intact in the freezer instead of serving myself a few scoops, how does that help my neighbor, which Lenten sacrifice ideally does? Well, it **doesn't** help my neighbor, unless I donate the money I would have spent on those luxuries to help those whose "fast" is not spiritual but practical, not voluntary, but imposed by poverty. **However:** if I consciously take baby steps over the 40 days of Lent to limit my creature comforts, to practice self-discipline, to walk with my Lord toward His Passion,

death and resurrection, that all counts as “legit” practice to take up my cross and follow Him.

Today’s Gospel is the beginning of a whole series of lessons our Lord Jesus teaches on discipleship, the art of following Him. Just before He had asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27) Then He asked the question He was **really** interested in: “But who do **you** say that I am?” (Mark 8:29) Peter was the star student who answered, “You are the Messiah.” (Mark 8:29) Jesus tells them all, “Mum’s the word about that!” then goes on to tell them the kind of Messiah He’ll be. He won’t be the militaristic, nationalistic leader whom they’d been expecting. He won’t muster an army to evict the Romans from their country, as they’d hoped. He’ll be a suffering Savior, one who won’t kill, but be killed. Then He’ll rise victorious again, but the bad news He shared first deafened them to the good news that followed.

Peter is so shocked by our Lord’s first Passion prediction that he becomes downright insubordinate and **rebukes** the Lord. The student has no right to dress down the teacher, but that is what Peter, the disciple, does in his horror at what his rabbi has just said. Another Gospel tells us that Peter reacts, *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* (Matt. 16:22) This causes Jesus to lash out at him, put him in his place, crying, *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* (Mark 8:33) That’s paraphrased in *The Message* as, *“Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.”*

How true, most of the time, that we have no idea how God works. But our cluelessness isn’t for lack of Jesus **telling** us who He is, and who His followers are called to be. *“The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”* (Matt. 20:16) *“The one who would be*

*great among you must be the servant of all.” (Matt. 20:26) “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” (Mark 9:37) “Whenever you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:40) “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12) If we obey those marching orders we’re going to bump up against “the powers that be” and we’ll know what it is to carry our cross for the Savior’s sake. Our “cross to bear” isn’t so much our physical ailments, our career disappointments, our body type, or the paltry balance in our bank account. Our “cross to bear” is the suffering we experience because we speak truth to power on behalf of the powerless and the voiceless. Our “cross to bear” is the criticism of family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, because we **insist** on welcoming the stranger, forgiving “those who trespass against us,” accepting those whom others reject and bringing the marginalized into the heart of our community as Scripture teaches us to do.*

Maybe what the Lord **really** wants me to give up this Lent is my complacency at the suffering of others. Maybe He doesn’t want me simply to **reflect** on the Way of the Cross, but to **walk** it with others. He definitely isn’t finished with me yet. And He says to us, as He said to Peter: “Get behind me!” He’s ahead, we’re behind, exactly where we **need** to be to follow faithfully. Amen

¹Arthur C. Brooks, “What You Gain When You Give Things Up,” *The Atlantic* (February 18, 2021), on-line.

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