



A Note from the Pastor's Corner

Here we are, in the middle of the Lenten season. You may have wondered why I didn't focus on Lent last month. I guarantee it wasn't because I forgot about it. I let it come unannounced because it seems that many of us have forgotten about it. If that sounds like confusing doublespeak, it's not because I'm planning to launch a career as a politician. Let me explain.

Like most Protestants who grew up in the 20th century, I had no idea what Lent was. Free-church Protestants (Baptists, e.g.) had long since jettisoned anything and everything that had Roman Catholic roots. The idea was that if it was something invented by the Roman Church, it was left behind. Period.

After a few centuries passed, leaders in various Protestant groups began to think that approach at reform may have been a bit hasty. After all, their own denominations had invented their own non-biblical traditions that had long since become "sacred". Out of curiosity, perhaps, some turned their attention to the practices of our Catholic sisters and brothers and found true spiritual value in some, if not much, of what they had encountered.

One of those practices is the observance of Lent.

Slowly, the practice of turning the 40 days (not counting Sundays) before Easter as a time to focus on the coming Easter celebration has become a part of free-church life. According to Wikipedia, "The traditional purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer — through **prayer, repentance, almsgiving and self-denial** — for the annual commemoration during Holy Week of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, which recalls the events linked to the Passion of Christ and culminates in Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ."

What has become the most overt of these practices is the one of self-denial. It's the only one I ever hear people talk about. I never hear discussions about people seriously changing the direction [read: attitudes and motives as well as actions] of their life. Or prayer. Have you ever heard people talk about the nature of their prayer life during Lent while they hang around the water cooler? I never have. Ditto almsgiving.

But self-denial is another story. People actually "give up" chocolate. Honest! It's true! What a tremendous sacrifice! Some even give up going to the movies, eating out, or drinking beer. I remember hearing someone say they were giving up peanut butter. Now, that really *is* a sacrifice! Even though psychologists tell us that 40 days is about the amount of time it takes to establish a new routine practice as a life-long habit, something tells me that more chocolate is consumed the minute after sunrise on Easter Sunday than on Hallowe'en. In other words, it's more of a game – a test of personal will-power – than it is about changing one's way of living.

Even more important (to me) is that self-denial is all about self. Jesus is about others. Unless denial of self is somehow linked to, or a result of, a focus on serving – and balanced with prayer, repentance, and almsgiving – then I think we're on the wrong track. It's when we accept the entire package that our life and the lives of those around us might be changed in real and practical ways.

But that in itself is not why I did not focus on Lent this year. It seems as if the novelty has worn off. Lent is becoming just another Church tradition that comes and goes every year. For a brief while in the late '80s, through the '90s, and into the 21st century, I noticed free-church Protestants taking a serious look at the intent and practice of Lent. I can't say whether it made a difference in the lives of those who did so, but it was being observed in a soul-searching way.

Some may still be seriously approaching Lent in that way. But from what I've been seeing and hearing, it's become little more than – I hesitate to express it in this way – 'background noise'. It gets a wave of the hand on Ash Wednesday and that's about it.

So I think it may be time to give it a rest for a few years – or more. It's like so many other things in life. It doesn't take long for a good idea to become stale and lose its significance. Before long, an inspired idea becomes a 'sacred' tradition that is observed but nobody can remember why it came to be. (I use 'sacred' in quotes here to indicate something that is accepted with unquestioning loyalty.)

But, if Lenten practices are important to your spiritual life and it helps you grow and develop as an apprentice of Jesus, I whole-heartedly encourage you to continue in your spiritual exercises. And if you do, consider journaling about your experience. Then consider sharing your experience. As long as it's more than, "I gave up chocolate for Lent!"

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud