

“A Sanctifying Season”

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17;
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;
Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

I had probably better start out by explaining the title of this sermon: “A Sanctifying Season.” To begin with, today is the first day of the 40-day serious church season of Lent, from now until Easter, not counting Sundays. Sundays are still to be joyful, and not as serious.

Lent is a much misunderstood season in the church, even sometimes a source of amusement. I can still remember a billboard urging us all to give up hamburgers for Lent. The billboard was put up by the H. Salt Fish and Chips people.

Lent is supposed to be a time of holy preparation for the great and holy time of Easter. It is not the sole property of the Roman Catholic Church, either, although are probably the experts.

Historically, in Europe , church and state were intermingled, and so Lent was enforced by church and state.

“In earlier times Lent was a solemn season. People ate no meat, fish, cheese, butter, eggs, or milk and used no lard in cooking.

Until 1863 England had a law forbidding these foods during Lent. Violators could be fined or imprisoned. Only the sick and infirm were excused. Brightly colored clothes, games, parties, and festivities were forbidden.” (Taken from Come to Easter: The Customs of the Lenten and Easter Seasons, compiled by Pat Floyd.)

Of course, people being people, there were loopholes to be found and stretched. If you made sizable money donations to the church, you might be allowed to eat butter. In fact, there is a cathedral in France with one tower called the “Butter Tower .” That tower was financed by such “donations/bribes.”

But here we are in 2009, in America. No one is going to force the traditions of Lent upon you—not me, not the food police, not a government official.

And, it almost seems that many of us are experiencing a lot of sacrifices, against their will. Some have “sacrificed: their jobs—their homes—their retirement money. All of us are greatly affected by higher prices.

And these were not things anyone volunteered for.

Because of this, I am not going to push hard for one of the usual traditions of Lent: “give up something for Lent.” A lot of people are already giving stuff up, and not really for the good of their souls!

Besides, we are all smart enough to understand that Lent, being a time of holy preparation, is a time to draw closer to God. Therefore, anything we do want to give up needs to be something that has been getting in the way of that.

It could be a habit that is harmful. Harming our bodies does interfere with our relationship with God. I know of three ladies who have given up smoking this week—that’s great. Smoking, poor eating or overeating, drinking or overdrinking would be examples, and excellent things to give up for this season, or forever.

Or maybe, you would like to give up a different kind of bad habit. Say, temper. Anyone here have a temper? Just one, well you are honest! I have a temper, too. Or always being late, or getting into foolish arguments—because anything that shows disrespect to people gets in the way of our relationships with them and with God.

However, what I really want to push is this: I want to challenge us to make this Lent “A Sanctifying Season.” There’s that title again, and I forgot to go into the sanctifying part.

This is a piece of Methodist theology, and I just love it. I looked it up in my seminary book, to make sure I had it straight, and yep, here are those pink highlighter marks.

Okay, as Christians, we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. When we do this we have salvation. Here’s the Methodist part—salvation has two branches: justification and sanctification.

Justification is the “being made right with God” part. God accepts us, at the moment of salvation, just as we are—or as the song goes “Just as I am, without one plea.” Justification is like that part of a computer that fixes up your margins instantly. The problem we might have is that in our society now, we use the word justification to mean making excuses, and that is not how Methodist theology uses it.

The second branch is sanctification—and I just love that part. As wonderful as it is that God accepts us as we are, I think this part, sanctification, is even better. Sanctification means being made holy, growing in God’s grace, growing more like Christ. It is a work of the Holy Spirit, within us, with our cooperation.

Now, why do I find this so great? For two reasons, I guess. One is that the process of sanctification closes up that loophole so often heard: “Okay, I’ve been baptized, I’ve been saved, now I never have to do another good thing the rest of

my life. I can skip church, I can rob banks, I can do anything. I am saved, for good and always. I've got it made!" That is a rotten attitude, and it distorts the idea of Christian salvation something awful. It makes it sound like a matter of technicalities: like pine tar on a baseball bat—or having someone who just died still run for governor—or letting criminal activity get by, because of some legal loophole.

That's very disrespectful to God.

The other reason I like sanctification is because I am a doer. I like to do something toward a goal. I like being in a church that does good for people, especially people in need. I consider it an honor to be able to do something for God during Lent. I like the idea of improving over time, throughout life.

So, that is what I want for all of us, the challenge of a "Sanctifying Season." The other traditional practices of Lent work really well here: prayer, attending worship, Bible study, mission work.

Here are some suggestions—take on a special, daily prayer—for peace, for someone with a problem, for the country (doesn't it need it?), for your neighborhood, for the new Presidential Administration. If you want a really challenge, do what Jesus said, pray for an enemy. How about Osama Bin Laden? If we all prayed for him to have decency, it might be a good thing. Or if that is too hard, maybe someone you know personally.

Or, recommit to be in worship every Sunday, especially if that has not been your pattern. I said re-commit, because if you belong to the church, you've already made that promise.

How about Bible study? Starting this Sunday, we will have three going on—Tuesday morning, Tuesday evening, and Sunday morning—those books are out on the table. Or you can study on your own, but that is harder.

You might want to commit to one of our mission efforts. We collect clothes for the Grand Avenue Temple's homeless project. In March we are collecting soap and deodorant for Crossroads, the Salvation Army homeless shelter. We are collecting canned fruit and boxed Jello for the Food Pantry. Or used eyeglasses, cell phones, computer toner cartridges, newspapers, or pop-tops off cans for the Ronald McDonald House at Children's Mercy Hospital.

Any and all of these things can bring you closer to God. These spiritual disciples, as they are traditionally called, are special ways for the Holy Spirit to make you into a better, more deeply committed Christian, and bring you to Easter day, April the 12th, with a heart and soul bursting with love and gratitude for the Lord.

That brings us to these blank papers. They are for us to write out what we will be doing for Lent—giving up a problem, taking on a prayer, taking on a practice.

When I tell you it is time, please put them in the collection plate on the railing. I'll seal them up in an envelope like I did with last years.

Then, next year on Ash Wednesday of 2010, they can be burnt into ashes, like the 2008 Lent envelope was, out on our front steps this afternoon. (So far, no one has called the Fire Department on me!)

Be thinking and writing, as the service continues.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)