

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

February 17, 2010

Matthew emphasizes that the essential Christian practices of giving alms, praying and fasting should be done in a sacred environment between the giver and God. These practices should not be done in a way to draw public attention to the giver. This may be hard to do in the society in which we live. Society seems to expect that deeds good or bad be paraded in the various media.

The apparent purpose is “see me, see what I do.” This may be why it is so difficult for our society to consistently share or care for those less fortunate. We respond well to large tragic events, like the earthquake’s devastation in Haiti, at least for a while. We seem to pay little attention to the day-to-day misery around us, like the plight of the poor and of illegal immigrants.

As we get to Matthew 6:19-20, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” we have staring at us right now a financial depression caused by greed which makes mockery of this passage. The greed of bankers, lenders, and Wall Streeters thinking only of their own profit sacrificed, in the process, the earnings, savings, jobs, and homes of millions of people. The greedy were storing up treasures but not in heaven.

However, I am consoled by knowing that there are many around us who do adhere to the words of Matthew and are quietly giving, praying and building up treasures in heaven. They are functioning above the airways and cyberspace in God’s space.

Doyt L. Conn MD

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February 18, 2010

After reading this portion of scripture, I felt guilty of making any outward display of reverence during our beautiful and richly adorned worship service. It was, in fact, the pageantry, years of liturgical tradition, and beautiful music that had originally drawn me into the Episcopal church. What am I to do now when we read and hear, "At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow?" I have been so accustomed to bowing my head when Jesus' name is mentioned that it has become an involuntary response propelled by muscle memory.

Is what I think of as "my private worship" within the context of corporate worship now going to change? Should I say my prayer of confession silently, not sing the Sursum Corda, or keep the ashes on my forehead? I have always looked forward to that smudge and visceral feeling on my body when these ashes are pressed into the flesh. These outward signs have to mean something.

What does it ultimately mean "to beware of practicing your piety, to give silently, pray alone, or fast alone?" Are we alone to know what we have done to help others? It's been my experience of knowing people who were willing to help with their time as well as their finances if you needed them. You could call upon them and rely upon them.

And yet we read, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Where are your treasures?

Where is your heart?

I had pondered, questioned, and prayed upon this scripture. My own treasures -- my parents, who are no longer here and for whom I still cherish; relationships with my husband, friends, and family members who need care and comfort. And then, of course, that tiny country of Haiti. They have no treasures, and yet we have seen and heard them sing songs of praise to God. We know where their heart is.

So -- what are we to do during Lent and the rest of the year?

I believe that it is in the honesty and purity of what we do and say on a daily basis that Heavenly Father and Jesus want from us. How do we treat each other? Are we aware of our impact on each other? Can we do something to make someone feel better with a caring voice, presence, or our financial resources? If we strive to live a Christ like life daily, perhaps we will then pray aloud, sing the Sursum Corda, and sound a trumpet!

Beth Chenault

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February 19, 2010

Every time I encounter this passage from Matthew, my thoughts go so many places and countless faces cross my mind. From popular televangelists; spiritual role models I have longed to emulate; larger-than-life tongue-speaking, dynamic characters from my childhood; public posting of pledges; being shamed into bowing my head and holding hands for an extravagant prayer before a public meal; scenes from films of pious and overly self-righteous zealots in the temple; personally struggling to get all the donors' names exactly as they wish to see them in the concert series programs; the endless brass plaques with names of those having gone before and, seemingly more importantly, the names of those who most generously paid for these forbearers to be immortalized by glass, pew, chalice, building or crucifix. Or, even writing a meditation for public consumption. Ash Wednesday-- here we are in church-- praying aloud, bewailing our "manifold sins and wickedness", kneeling - a long time - as we recite or intone Psalms, the imposition of ashes to be worn into the world as a sign of our mortality. None of these seem to follow the pattern the scripture here lays out for us.

What is one to make of the contradiction this scripture poses to our very human nature and so many of our worship traditions? Each of us longs to be recognized as good and generous. We want to be admired. We want company on this journey of life. Where is the balance? Perhaps the answer is in our motivation to give, to go to church, to pray. Does our appearance at church become more important than being in church? If so, maybe our focus needs to be redirected. Is having our name in a program or on a plaque more important than the gift itself? If so, maybe we should let the recognition go? Do we act to show-off and diminish those around us, or shame them into some desired behavior? Do we enjoy being the martyr?

I personally struggle with this scripture most as a church musician. Singing a solo in church is a very grand and public display. Of course, I want to do well and have folks like my voice, but I know I am not going about it correctly if the solo becomes more about me and my performance and less about our worship. It's tricky business. Singing is such an incredibly personal art form. It's a challenge to keep feelings and ego at bay. When at my best, I leave no stone unturned in my pursuit to enrich our worship when sharing my particular gift of music. In order to accomplish my goal, some basic preparation has to happen. I read the scriptures for the Sunday I am singing and try to pick something that is liturgically appropriate in mood and text. It should be something that suits my abilities. I have to know my music. I have to be reasonably well, vocally. If singing in any language other than English, I have to know how to say the words correctly and understand what they mean in order to convey them appropriately. As silly as it seems, sometimes I wish I could be totally transparent during the performance. I want absolutely nothing (including me) to distract the listener from the text and the music. If I am struggling for notes, worried about my voice, fatigued by singing something outside of my comfort zone, or the selection is inappropriate musically or liturgically, or becomes an overly grandiose dramatic or vocal display, the focus will be on me, not the offering and I have missed the mark.

So, in many ways, is our life as Christians. Actively working to find a balance between public and private, self and others. If the only time we pray is in the 9 or 11:15 Sunday morning service, we are missing an opportunity for deeper, more personal relationship with God. If we only pray hidden away in a closet and never worship or pray with the larger community of followers, we become isolated and out of touch and don't gain strength and wisdom from rich tapestry around us. If we give more for immediate gratification and recognition, we miss the true gift of giving. If we live primarily for the "stuff" we have and want, our relationships suffer. Conversely, if we never take time to enjoy what we do have and give thanks for it, what's the point of having it? Balance. We must strive to live in the now, but learn and grow from our past, while dreaming and working towards a better future: publicly and privately; generously and selfishly; humbly and boldly with authenticity and integrity.

DeWayne Trainer

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2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

February 20, 2010

So far in life, and no I'm not young, I've never "given up" anything for Lent. I guess I've never understood Lent well enough to know why I needed to sacrifice something in the first place. I mean, fasting; really, that hasn't seemed necessary to me in order to be a good Christian. And sadly, as I look back now, that is essentially what Lent has meant to me—giving up something.

So, over the past couple of weeks, knowing I had to write a letter, I did a little Lent re-con. And I learned a lot. I'll spare you the bulk of my education as it was no doubt elementary and most of you good Episcopalians already know this stuff. Here's what I ended up with--Lent is pretty heavy. It is a very holy time for the church; chock-full of special music, special liturgy, beautiful rituals, fasting and purification. But what speaks to me the most, after doing some lay-persons' research, is that it is very much a time of self-reflection. The build-up to Easter is an incredibly potent period for Christ, and us. And while I fear this letter is sounding incredibly self-indulgent, that potency really seemed to resonate with me (I'm still not sure if I have to give up chocolate at this point.).

So, in the spirit of Lent, this letter, and my upcoming period of self-reflection, I have been thinking on the verses of Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21. These are beautiful and direct verses, some of my favorite (even before they were given to me, I swear). If you are not familiar with them, they are essentially about praying, giving and behaving like...a Christian.

And now armed with my new knowledge of Lent, and earnestly wanting to reflect, pray and behave my way into (much) more constant Christian-like behavior, I am looking forward to experiencing my first "real" Lent.

Dana McKenzie

Lenten Meditations

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February 22, 2010

After two years of teaching Sunday school and preparing young adults for confirmation, this past summer my husband and I went on the pilgrimage to Ecuador with 11 of our students. In preparing for the journey and even while in Ecuador, I was thinking all along the pilgrimage and the experiences offered and gained were for the young adults – it was an opportunity for them to discover themselves and deepen their relationship with God, each other and those who crossed our path. What I did not realize until after the journey and with some reflection was that it was also a pilgrimage for me.

I knew the journey would offer me many memorable experiences, but I did not expect the peace of mind and clarity I had while on pilgrimage. Going into it I felt I had a strong sense of faith and a solid relationship with God, but recognized there would be opportunities to grow deeper in faith and obtain a better understanding on how to further my relationship with God, family, friends and even complete strangers. Each day we had an opportunity for reflection and meditation – a time to slow down, just think and connect with myself and God, which is something I rarely find time for in everyday life in Atlanta. It was liberating, and I never knew how much I needed it or how important that time could be.

When we returned from Ecuador and attended church that next Sunday, John Herring gave the sermon discussing our journey. After sharing several of our experiences, John explained that a pilgrimage is not saved for trips to some remote location, but can be pursued and experienced each and everyday. We can "choose pilgrimage" and live each day with time for reflection and meditation. So that day my husband and I bought a meditation book and promised each other to read and reflect every night -- we chose pilgrimage.

When asked to write this Lenten meditation, I pulled out the meditation book and realized we had stopped reading it a month after starting. Once again life in Atlanta caught up with us, and I was disappointed in myself.

My assigned passage in Luke is about temptation. I recognize temptation is a part of life and, as Jesus had to face temptation to understand us completely, we are tested and tempted daily by what we feel needs to get done and the daily grind, tugging us in all sorts of directions. There is no question after Ecuador I wanted to "choose pilgrimage," finding that time for reflection and meditation. But those everyday temptations that surround us (work, family commitments, social outings) pulled me away. Of course, Jesus used scripture to counter Satan's attacks in the desert, and knowing and obeying God's word is a good weapon against temptation. The difficult part is finding the time to read it and reflect on it. During this Lenten season I am challenging myself to make that time and "choose pilgrimage" once again.

Kelley Mauriello

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February 23, 2010

I know an excellent professor. He possesses a command of New Testament Greek language that allows him to look at the text in a way that is different than many others, to see the texts in many layers and many angles. He then opens that text to the rest of us in new and surprising ways. He is warm, thoughtful and engaging. It is common for many to approach him after a class to tell him what a great lecture he gave, and how wonderful he is, etc. He often replies, "I know. The devil already told me." One thing he understands is the power of seduction and the resulting separation from God.

Just prior to being led to the wilderness, Jesus was baptized and a voice from heaven said "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:37). Now Jesus is being tempted in the ways that we are tempted. The tempter is assaulting the very gifts made known to Jesus by God. The devil tempts Jesus to triumphantly prove his favored status, to use his gifts in self serving ways. Satan uses the power of seduction to move Jesus away from his mission. But, Jesus remains focused on the loving care of God, revealed in scripture and in prayer. Jesus rejects distorting his own gifts for short-term gains. This commitment and connection to God drives away the dark forces of Satan, and Jesus is sustained by angels that come to support him.

We are known as beloved and marked as Christ's own in our baptism. We all have some God given gifts endowed by our Creator, which we can use for our vocation and for the purpose of serving others. Yet, wherever we find God's gracious work, we will find the tempter trying to undermine that work, even in ourselves. We might fall into the trap of fear and self-doubt. Others might fall for the temptation of seduction. Each way is a path towards disfigurement of God's intention for human beings. However, as beloved children of God, our defense and comfort can be found in God when we reject these temptations and in doing so reject the path of separation from God. We are nurtured and fortified when we say "no" to the dark forces of temptation and "yes" to the light we find in God in Christ.

Though we take time in Lent for penitence and time to reflect on how we have given in to the tempter, we can also take comfort in knowing that we are beloved; we have gifts given by God; and, these gifts will be strengthened if we stay connected to God through Christ.

The Rev'd John Herring

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February 24, 2010

As Christians we may feel the presence of God is with us body and soul but the devil is constantly trying to distract us from our belief and wave us on to that which is ungodly. We must work to be aware of these distractions. Thought and prayer are essential ingredients in understanding Jesus' teaching and applying them to our daily struggles. The 40 days of Lent give us time to set aside and refuel our commitment to God's word. But, as we see in this passage of Luke 4:1-13, the devil is always around to confuse us about God's Wisdom.

The Devil vs. Jesus

Satan tempts us on many levels and is not easily discouraged.

The devil appealed to a basic need – food: “turn this stone into bread.” Sometimes the devil tempts us with things that are not necessarily evil, like changing stone into bread. But he is working up to sin, “if you worship me.”

The devil then tempted Jesus with status and power, an emotional need: “I will give you all these kingdoms.” In this passage, we see the devil taking Jesus back to his home Jerusalem. We may feel strong in our home territory but often it is the place where we are the weakest and where the devil will tempt us the greatest.

Finally, the devil tempted Jesus with a human desire for immortality – “jump off this cliff and have God's angels rescue you.” The devil knows God's word and tries to use it against us.

The passage opens with the Holy Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness where the devil was waiting. Often we come out of church service feeling good and full of the spirit of God and almost immediately we run into temptations. What did Jesus do when he was in the wilderness? He fasted and responded to the devil's temptations with God's word.

He set the example for us, and the lesson here is to follow Him.

Anne Berg

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February 25, 2010

Lent is a kind of spring cleaning. Once we set out with the idea that we are going to tidy up our spaces, we first make more of a mess. We have to pull the couch out from the wall, get the clothes out of the closet, and pick up the shower mat from the bathroom. Before you know it the space looked quite a lot nicer before we fumbled around trying to clean.

The season of Lent is something like this. We decide that we are going to pay attention to our space, our very person. Through fasting, prayer, worship, and devotional reading we set out to take stock of where we really are...you know, where we really are. Where are my fundamental allegiances? In what do I ultimately trust? How committed or obedient am I to the truth?

So we find Jesus in the desert. Recently baptized, committing himself to do the will of the one who sent him into the world. In order to run the race set before him, one that ends with the costliness of the cross, Jesus goes into the desert to take stock. We remember that Israel, as God's chosen people, were brought across the Red Sea by the power of God and spent 40-years in the wilderness putting God to the test. Jesus, as the representative of God's people, spends 40-days in the wilderness.

The voice he encounters is the same tone in our heads that lobbies for our trust, one that suggests that short circuiting our faith in the living God of love can produce results. Instead of opening ourselves up to the depths of God's life we can escape the gaze of God and scurry into cheap power, lust, money, and the sense that we are the creator of ourselves. Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, is offered all the kingdoms of the world. He could implement his ideas of public policy as the one in control. However, this is a king of different sorts; his policy is inextricably wrapped up with his obedience to the Father. Jesus is tested while sharing in our humanity and he perfects it where Israel falls short. It is through his personal humility to live out the will of the Father that he becomes the light of the world.

The asceticism of Lent is not to deprive us of certain crucial elements of our humanity but to put to question what we deem to be the true nature of our very lives. Opening ourselves up to stand in the place where Jesus Christ stood in the desert, we create the possibility of becoming human beings fully alive. Humans that are participating in the life of God and healing the world by who we are. We don't suppose that the Church has all the social programs and policies outlined perfectly, instead our trust is that aligning our will to the will of the Christ brings truth to life in us. As Christ's followers- Christians we call ourselves- pursuing the path set forth in history by God's Son, we enter into true humility which is life before our creator, and in so doing we become fully human. Let us put our trust to the test in this season so that we might be opened up to depths of God's love.

Zachary Thompson

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February 26

In Luke 4:1-13, Jesus says “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” That statement has always caused me to wonder what is so wrong with asking for proof of God. Children test the limits of their parent’s love. Why can’t we test God? Why must we have blind faith?

By tempting Jesus to test God, the devil is attempting to erode his faith. Testing any relationship requires deception – the person testing the relationship creates a fictional situation in order to evaluate the one who is being tested. To intentionally deceive or mislead a person with whom you are building a relationship seems at odds with the desired outcome. Manipulation erodes trust which is the foundation of all relationships.

When I read this passage the first test always stands out as being the hardest one to resist. But perhaps the third and final test is the hardest one. Hunger is something we can all understand, but the struggle to have faith in others affects me more on a daily basis. This struggle occurs not only with our relationship with God, but also with friends and family.

Relationships are not always equal. There are times when we feel we are only giving and getting nothing in return. We sometimes allow artificial and contrived moments to define our relationships. A gift on a holiday or birthday can take on too much importance and becomes a test of how well someone knows or loves us. But if you allow yourself to trust those you love, you can have faith that the love you show will be returned. Perhaps what Jesus means is that we are meant to mirror God’s love of us, like a parent’s love for their child, a love without question.

Kelli Taylor

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February 27, 2010

As a young child growing up in Atlanta, our family attended church at Northside United Methodist Church. As a third grader, my wonderful Sunday school teacher was Julia Bridges. She had a fabulous voice and loved singing beautiful hymns. She had a great talent and a true gift from God, the ability to lift the bible stories straight off the page and translate the scripture into stories and lessons that kept us on the edge of our chairs. Her gift made us feel like we were part of the story and when class was over, we could hardly wait for next Sunday to be a part of her magic again. We were third graders, she kept us focused and involved – actually, we were captivated - and she was the best!

I can only imagine what her lesson of this scripture according to Luke would have told us. She would have described the glory of the baptism of Christ and how soon after, the Holy Spirit would lead Him into the wilderness. The wilderness would have been really cold and rugged and barren with high rocks and blowing sand; when Jesus was alone and without nourishment, forty days and forty nights would have seemed like an eternity; the devil would have been a super-sinister individual; the holy city and the temple and the mountains and the kingdoms of the world would have been beautiful, filled with flowers and high peaks and luscious green valleys and beautiful architecture and candlelight and people rejoicing and bright, bright stars; the angels would have been comforting to all and celebrating being with Jesus. The temptations would have been huge and still are huge.

Reading this passage as an adult, its message is more vivid, perhaps more sobering than hearing it as a child. At some time or another, we have all been in a wilderness. Our wilderness may be related to employment, loss, being alone in a new city or estrangement from people we love. Our temptations are also greater and more numerous. The consequences of choices and actions are more daunting and more severe. Our testing is much harder.

But the message hasn't changed.

The devil offered Jesus wealth and power and pride. Three times he refused him with the power of scripture – “it is written”. Our continued wilderness experiences, the testing and the temptations create opportunities for us to resist them and grow with each step deeper into a faith filled journey with the one who has walked ahead of us. Jesus' victory over the devil reminds us of the triumph of good over evil and that we must still be responsible and submit to the will of God. It reminds us who we are and leads us to the commitment of who God wants us to be.

Dot Miller