

Lent #1
2/22/15
Mark 1:9-15
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Many of us can readily identify with being a do-it-yourselfer. We fix things, build things, and are challenged by projects which demand our skills and talents. There are enough of us that retailers like Home Depot and Lowes are constantly realizing a strong bottom line profit. They do everything to entice us onto our next project by offering demonstrations in all areas of home improvement. There are books and magazine devoted to the do-it-yourselfer with detailed plans and illustration which make everything look easy to accomplish.

Of course there is pride in being able to complete a project and saying “I did that” - a definite feather in the ego hat. This is very important to us since everyone needs to have a sense of self-worth and accomplishment. It is rather easy to find this sense of accomplishment in interacting with the tangible world of things we can see, touch, and create. The drive for accomplishment within this tangible world is what is known as work ethic. We think that anything worth having is within the grasp of how hard we work for it. Therefore, we know that if we develop our knowledge, skills, and talents and apply time and energy, the results will be accomplishment. We are thereby in charge of our own rewards.

This is the way of living in the tangible world. Thus, it is very understandable that we like to apply the same mentality and philosophy to religion. We see the need to follow tangible steps just as the do-it-yourselfer follows plans and instructions. If we attend church, if we read the Bible, if we pray, if we are baptized, if we take communion, if we follow the rules or laws then we will realize the promised reward. This tangible thinking is very prevalent in Christianity.

Such thinking is most evident in the many traditions and practices of Lent. These traditions have centered upon the themes of sacrifice and outward expressions of piety. It is a time for the do-it-yourself mentality. Just follow the instructions. Most common is to give up something for Lent. The best one I recently saw was “I am giving up winter for Lent.” Right about now I think we all could say “Amen” to that. Then you have no meat on Friday, no meat throughout Lent, no cooking with lard or animal fat which led to Shrove Tuesday traditions. Some traditions included fast days and the avoidance of any kind of celebrations and even avoidance of performing marriages.

There have been times in history when Lent was a time to inflict pain upon oneself through mutilations and even floggings. These acts were done publicly so as to let others witness the person’s piety and sacrifice. Others placed ashes on their bodies and wore uncomfortable, scratchy burlap like sack cloth. These were all physical acts in preparation for the day of the Resurrection. They were tangible steps which were supposed to make you a better Christian. To many Lent still is the time to exercise a do-it-yourself religion. It is a tangible and easy way of approaching religion.

But I am afraid that such a work ethic reward system is alien to that of the spiritual world and especially alien to Jesus message. Lent and the preparation for the receiving of the Resurrection of Jesus goes far deeper than the tangible. No amount of tangible work for the sake of self promoting and rewards are within the realm of the message of Jesus. We cannot earn our way into the realization of the Resurrection. It is a gift from God. Paul stated, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God – not the result of works...” So the traditions of Lent in and of themselves are meaningless. They are like Don Quixote’s meaningless fight against the windmill. They lead nowhere except to enhance or even sometimes deflate the ego.

Lent goes far deeper than the obvious traditions. Historically Lent was a time of instruction for those who wish to be baptized and join the Body of Christ. This entailed six weeks of intense instruction, meditation, and personal preparation as catechumens. Upon the completion of the six weeks they would be baptized on the evening prior to the celebration of the Resurrection, Easter. Some churches still follow this practice.

But, for most, Lent is the time to search oneself as to who we really are in light of the life and message of Jesus. What is our motivation in life? This all begins with Jesus' statement, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news." Although we are to be repentant throughout our lives, this period of time of Lent is a particularly significant time to reflect upon our relationship with God and how we live up to the example of love as demonstrated by Jesus. Upon this reflection we discover how we fall short and violate His great commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It is during this time of reflection that we discover how temptation leads us astray. We discover that we are easily diverted from living this love because we have fallen in love with what the tangible world says we need. We are lured to believe that these things bring satisfaction and happiness. If we turn our attention away from these things and the love of them to the meaning of the cross, then we realize we have been misled. In light of the cross and the suffering and sacrifice which Jesus endured we begin to understand the real nature of love. We begin to understand the words in First Peter, "Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." We can begin to understand this act of God's love with this poignant definition of love, "There is no greater love than for a man to lay down his life for another man."

It is upon this comparison of our lives with the love of the cross that we can begin to understand what repentance and Lent is all about. We can understand that even though we may think we love with all our heart, soul, and mind that in actuality we fall short. The problem is that without this acknowledgment we will continue our lives upon the same path which leads us nowhere. If you look at the word repent and change the "n" to an "a" you now spell repeat. This is what happens when we fail to repent we just repeat the same shortcomings over and over again and never come to any understanding of the meaning of the cross. We never are able to know the joy of forgiveness and depth of God's love.

It is during Lent which we can turn the focus of our lives to change any misunderstanding which we may have. This change, which comes through repentance, not only brings a renewed understanding of God's love through the cross but the ultimate extension of God's love through the Resurrection. The empty tomb becomes the true good news which brings us the ultimate joy of living.

Just like those who may be preparing for baptism into the body of Christ our time of repentance during Lent brings us to review our own baptism and what it means. We are told at baptism "In baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ." Thus during our journey through Lent we have the opportunity to discover who we are in relationship with the Cross and the Resurrection. Lent thus can be that time which redirects our lives from the false promises and even traditions of the tangible world into the joy of living the promise of God's love which he freely extends to us. This is what will lead us to truly celebrate the empty tomb and be able to shout with joy on Easter morning "He is Risen, He is Risen indeed"