

Lenten Devotional

Written by Gayle Parker for Lent 2019

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Lent is a season of turning from things that distract us from the Lord in order to turn toward the Lord. It's a time for admitting that some of the things we are seeking/wanting from life and the places we are seeking them are actually keeping us from the life we were created to live, the life deep down we long to live. So we practice disciplines of prayer, fasting, giving alms (giving especially to the poor). Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues for the 40 days prior to Easter, except for Sundays. Sundays are always a day of resurrection. But the rest of the next 40 days are days of repentance. Turning away from things that are distracting us from being fully God's in order to turn toward him.

For those who follow the lectionary, every Ash Wednesday, the gospel reading comes from Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

These words tap into some of the things we often seek from life. If what we really seek from life is that people will notice us when we give or when we pray, or when we fast, then that's what we'll get. At least that seems to be his argument. If we're aiming for recognition, admiration for our piety, our sacrificial giving, then we'll likely achieve it; but our success will not satisfy us for long.

In his book *As Kingcatchers Catch Fire* Eugene Peterson talks about Elie Wiesel, the Jewish holocaust survivor who became a famous writer, one whom Peterson was fascinated with because his writings had changed through the years – early on being a person without faith to being a person with faith. When he had a chance to hear Wiesel lecture, he jumped at it. “When he appeared on the lecture platform, with neither explanation nor apology, he began by reading Genesis 15, the story of Abraham, and spent the next hour leading us, an obviously secular audience of 700 or 800 people, in what was essentially a Bible study... Several times during the lecture Wiesel used the word *midrash*. “If we are realistic persons, honest persons, alert person,” he said, “the *midrash* will enter our lives. The word *midrash* is a Hebrew word that means “seek out.”

“The opposites of *seek* is *dawdle*,” says Peterson. “To live aimlessly and listlessly. We either dawdle, or we live furiously, redoubling our energy when we lose our direction... To seek God means, in every part of Scripture, to cast all our hopes upon him.”

Entering into Lent can help us intentionally seek God, but not furiously trying to be a better Christian, frantically making sure that we pray, read scripture, fast, give. It's a seeking that results in surrender to this wonderful God who loves us so much he gave his only Son. So we who trust our lives to him might live the life we long for so deeply but seek in places that can't give it to us. The power of Lenten disciplines is not that they summon us to double down on self-effort but just the opposite. Lent invites us to embrace the truth that we all exist in the terrifying, beautiful predicament of being absolutely in the hands of divine mercy. So we can surrender our body, our money, our future, our reputation, our spirituality – all of it, trusting that as we do, we will fall into the hands of God's grace and kindness.

Entering In

So we begin as we receive the symbolic gesture of the imposition of ashes on our foreheads and acknowledge our human finiteness and mortality. “You are dust and to dust you will return.” This not meant

to be morbid; it is just meant to confront our grandiosity and help us stay in touch with the real human condition that we all share.

Why do we begin with the imposition of ashes? The ash markings carry the same meaning contained in the OT practice of covering oneself with ashes: the ashes are an outward sign of an inward repentance and mourning as we become aware of our sin. This is good for us because we live in so much denial.

What spiritual disciplines might you take on during LENT?

Matthew 6 highlights some concrete disciplines that have the potential to loosen the grip of sin and compulsion in our lives, thus creating more space for God.

v. 2, 3 *How will I give?*

v. 5-13 *How will I pray?*

v. 14-15 *Who do I need to forgive and from whom do I need to seek forgiveness?*

v. 16-18 *How will I fast? What do I need to abstain from in order to create more freedom and space for God?*

We fast or abstain from ways we normally distract ourselves from what's really going on in our lives spiritually – the reality of our sin and the deeply patterned behaviors that keep us from our calling to follow Christ. We allow some of the external trappings of our lives to be stripped away so that we can find our true identity and calling in Christ once again. We acknowledge the subtle temptation to which we are prone rather than pretending we are beyond temptation. We face the spiritual reality of the battle being waged for our very souls. Why? Because we want to experience the resurrection in places we know we have been deadened. Do you want greater freedom in places where you are in bondage?

What are some things you might fast from and why choose those? Find ways that address things in your life that are distracting you. Ruth Haley Barton writes, “If you are struggling with issues related to ego and pride, you might discipline yourself to say no to activities that feed your ego. If you struggle with sins of speech or carelessness with your speech, you might consider additional time in silence every day or take retreat of silence sometime during the season. If you have an inner exhaustion that you haven't been paying attention you might choose to say no to caffeine and other stimulants in order to walk all the way into your exhaustion and spend time with Lord about that. In the absence of substances that keep you stimulated, you might ask God to reveal the deeper sources of your tiredness. If you tend towards the sin of gluttony and know that your eating patterns are out of control, you might consider some level of fasting. If your prayer life has been lack you might commit to more intentional rhythms of prayer. If you send God inviting you to deeper levels of self-examination and introspection, but know you tend towards morbidity and depression, you might enter more intentionally into community and spiritual friendship during this time – asking for the help and prayers of others.”

v. 19-21 *Where is my treasure – really – as it is reflected in how I use my time, financial resources and energy? Is there any specific way in which God is inviting me to “let go” of my attachment to some earthly treasure in order to invest in that which is eternal?*

Preparing for the disciplines of LENT

Lent is a time for “giving things up” balanced by “giving to” those in need. So, spend time with the Lord asking him to show you what disciplines will help you return to him with all your heart. Jesus is saying that we want and will seek something deeper, more potent, if what we are really seeking is God and the life God

promises. He isn't primarily interested in whether we act in public or in private, but rather in whether or not we have the audacity to trust him with our life, to cast all our hope on him. If we do, by His transforming grace, we will experience resurrection of new life where we have been in bondage.