

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/3/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

So, why give something up for Lent?

This is a bit revisionist history, but many years ago, new Christians were only received into the church on Easter. As preparation for that great event and to show their commitment to the faith, these candidates went through instruction, and fasted through the forty days of Lent, just as CHRIST fasted in the wilderness for forty days after HIS baptism. Now, fasting for forty days sounds almost impossible. But remember that Sundays are little Easters and are not really part of Lent. The Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter are “in” Lent but are not “of” Lent. Since they are apart from Lent, those fasting could eat on Sundays—just not the other days of the week.

The practice of fasting during Lent came to be one observed by most Christians. Many, however, complained that it was just too hard to fast Monday through Saturday for nearly seven weeks. So, the expectation was lowered to just giving up meat for Lent. Eating fruits and vegetables was acceptable. But many complained, so again, the bar was lowered to not eating meat just on Fridays. And when folks protested even this practice, the allowance was made for eating fish, but not red meat on Friday. Many Roman Catholics observe this discipline, and not just during Lent, but throughout the year. That is why restaurants offer a Friday fish special each week. (If you feel like Roman Catholics have a lot of power in that restaurants do this for them every Friday, however, don't be concerned. They serve coffee every day for Lutherans.) And it's not just fasting during Lent. Many will choose something else to “give up” as a Lenten practice.

A few thoughts on this. First, the purpose of giving something up for Lent, whether it is food or something else, is to become deeply aware of the impossibility of giving up sin. And not just during Lent, but every day. Such awareness helps us to realize the need for CHRIST and HIS sacrifice on the cross for our sins. Like those who found that fasting through Lent to be too difficult, we should recognize that we are helpless to be free of sin and its consequences on our own. If you really want to understand the difficulty of giving up sin, choose to abstain from something significant, like using your car, or the internet, or the furnace or heater in your house. Even the thought of any of these disciplines should help you to see that we are powerless to avoid sin. We need JESUS!

Second, often the things that we give up are done so for personal improvement. Lent becomes an opportunity to abandon certain food, like sweets or desserts, or behaviors like smoking, or for adopting new practices like praying, or reading the Bible, or exercising every day. There are many great ideas for self-reformation, but why wait for Lent? And why do it only during Lent? If these are things you've been wanting to do, then just start doing them. Perhaps connecting them to Lent can be the additional motivation for which you've been looking. Still, if they are life-changes you want or need to make, do so, and don't wait or limit yourself to Lent.

Third, the idea of giving something up for Lent is part of the Roman Catholic practice of performing actions that will “pay” for the sins committed. As I previously discussed, Roman Catholics believe that JESUS' death on the cross only atones for original sin. The payment for all your other failures to live as GOD calls you to is up to you. Thus, going to worship, confession and absolution, receiving the sacraments, and fasting or giving something up for Lent are all ways to redress your sinful

actions. We, however, believe that the sacrifice of JESUS is compensation covering all sin. Therefore, fasting and other such actions are unnecessary. We are free from this need. Yet, to make Lent meaningful, I suggest taking on something extra, just as JESUS took our sin upon HIMSELF on our behalf. That's why I've encouraged us to share our faith this Lent by developing a relationship with someone who isn't connected to a congregation. The hope is that, in the course of growing this relationship, you will find opportunity to talk about your faith, and to invite this friend to join you in worship on Easter Sunday.

Lent can be meaningful for us as Christians and as we seek to grow in our discipleship. But it is important to think about how best and why we are choosing to do this. Let this be a season to renew or reform your faith in ways that will help you to draw closer to GOD and in your commitment as a disciple of JESUS.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey