

“Lint?” 1 March 2009 March 1, 2009

This is the first Sunday of that season that the church refers to as Lent. It has to do with the forty days that lead up to our celebration of Holy Week and Easter, and has historically been described as a time for reflection and introspection, a time to think about how we become better, more faithful people.

However, this season can be confusing to many and downright befuddling to those who have not been part of the traditions of the church. Heck! It can be confusing for those of us who *have* a little church background. If we've been involved in a church at all, especially when we were younger, it may have all begun there.

After all, the very word itself conjures up an image that seems to have little or nothing to do with anything spiritual. It's similar to a story that's told about a children's message that was shared on a Sunday like this one—the first Sunday in that season. The leader asked the group of kids who surrounded him if they knew what Lent was. One bright child quickly responded, “It's what comes out of our pockets!” Another chimed in, “My Mom takes it out of the dryer!” After all, that's lint...isn't it?

A lot of kids think of lint as something they find in and around their belly buttons. I've read several acknowledgements that this is not an uncommon phenomenon. For instance, one precocious 5-year-old reported the confusion he had between “lint” spelled with an “l,” and “Lent” spelled with an “e.” He thought that Lent (with an “e”) referred to the fuzz he found around his belly button, that, mysteriously was never there in the morning, but somehow managed to be there by nightfall.

I found it a bit amusing the way one guy tried to describe his fascination with lint (with an “l”). He shared that his wife was not at all interested in his concern about how lint got into his belly button. She dismissed him saying that it just came from his clothing, and to forget about it. However, he could not, mainly because nothing that he wore seemed ever to match the color of the lint. He said that no matter what he had on, the lint always turned out to be grey. That analysis led him to believe that the lint obviously did not come from his clothing. The only logical conclusion, he said, was that the lint must be coming from inside of him!

Well, enough of the warble about lint and Lent. Let's talk about what Lent with an “e” has to do with us. If it is a time of introspection and reflection, then upon what do we reflect? Some traditions encourage folks to give up something for Lent—often a food or some other habit that we have, saying that it's a kind of sacrifice that symbolic of the way Jesus lived his life.

Frankly, none of that ever really resonated with me, probably because I don't buy into some of those traditional renderings of what Jesus was all about.

However, the Bible passage we have for today might lead us to explore this whole notion of Lent a bit more closely. It's one that you may have heard, and I think it might be interesting for us to explore what it might be saying to us about our launch into the season of Lent.

It's Jesus who's speaking, and he says this:

“If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, take up your cross every day, and follow me. For I you want to save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will save it.” What's going on here? What are these words trying to tell us?

Let me tell you how I understand it. You may or may not agree with me, and that's OK. This is just where I come down on this passage. Jesus indicates that if we want to live our lives more the way he lived his, it means we must forget ourselves. Other versions use the phrase to “deny” ourselves. What in the world does that mean?

I really believe we're being urged to move ourselves out of the center of our focus. Many if not all of us have a tendency to think it's all about me, that everything revolves around me. Frankly, most of us are pretty self-centered, self-serving people. We think of ourselves first and foremost, and ten to believe that we're the most important thing in the world.

I think this is Jesus' way of letting us know that yes, we're loved, we're important, but so is everyone else. We're not lone rangers here; instead we're part of a global family, and what impacts one of us impacts all of us. This is reminder that it's not “me, me, me.” We need to look more broadly and open our eyes and arms more widely to get beyond our own self-interest, and look toward the general good. What's best for *all* of us, not just me, or you, or one of us?

The next thing Jesus says is that we have to “take up our cross.” The kind of cross that was used for crucifixion in ancient times was a brutal instrument of death, and often the prisoner condemned to death was forced to carry the crosspiece to the place of death. It was incredibly heavy, and could inflict serious injury by its very weight. That was the literal understanding.

What I think Jesus meant by this is that we have to be willing to realize that, if we live our lives focused more on others than ourselves, if we give generously of ourselves instead of hoarding all we have, that we will pay a price. The price may seem heavy at the time, but in the long run, it's the better way to live. Those who insist on short-term gains and wins are the ultimate losers. What Jesus wants us to know is that this can feel like carrying a heavy cross when we're misunderstood, questioned, challenged and mocked, but it's still the better way to live, when it's all said and done.

Then we read that if we strive to save our lives, we'll lose them, but if we're willing to lose our lives, we'll save them. Sounds like double-talk, doesn't it? I think this simply means that we're not on this earth to play it safe or to always be trying to figure out how much we can get. Rather living life the way Jesus envisions it means that we think about what and how we can give, rather than focusing on getting. We turn outward, rather than inward. We choose what is right, rather than what is convenient or easy.

So, OK. What is this saying to us about the way we walk through these next 40 days...that is, if we choose to use this time to do some self-examination with the intent of improving the way we live? Do we need to give up something, to sacrifice something?

"Sacrifice" is one of those words that kind of gives me hives, but I think that's because in our culture, it's not understood very well. However, I really like the way Nora Gallagher talks about sacrifice in her book, *Practicing Resurrection*. She basically says that if we live our lives faithfully, there is an element of sacrifice in them, but not as we typically understand sacrifice. She quotes the Jungian author Robert Johnson who said, "Sacrifice is not giving up something to get something else you want more. Sacrifice is the art of drawing energy from one level and reinvesting it at another level."

What would it mean, then, for us to give up something, to sacrifice something during Lent? What if we tried to give up some of our selfish, self-centered ways? Maybe it's deciding that we're going to quit being so negative, that instead of complaining about everyone and everything, we'll make an intentional effort to look for the positive, even to become more aware of the good things. While we would be giving up some less than desirable trait, we could well be developing more positive ones, and in the process begin to be more caring and compassionate people. Maybe, just maybe.

What if, during Lent, we decided to give up some of our time and dedicate it to giving back? Maybe we could volunteer at a shelter or in a classroom. Maybe we could pick up litter along a highway or in our neighborhood. If we just begin to focus in an outward way, we will find all kinds of people and places who could benefit from our touch—whether that's a word of encouragement, a pat on the back, a hug or a smile.

I think it was Horace Mann who talked about how important it is for us to give up some of our self-centeredness and give back to others. He was quoted as saying, "Doing nothing for others is the undoing of one's self. We must be purposely kind and generous or we miss the best part of existence, The heart that goes out of itself gets large and full of joy. This is the great secret of the inner life. We do ourselves the most good by doing something for others."

It seems to me that Lent with an "e" is all about that great secret of the inner life that Mann talked about. It's all about figuring out what our lives are all about, and how we are to live them. At least, that's what I think. How about you?

Closing:

The great Albert Schweitzer reflected on the purpose of our existence, and said, "Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: That we are here for the sake of others...for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day, I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of

people, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received."

That, to me, is something that I will reflect upon during this Lenten season, and maybe you'll want to, too.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.