

## THE DETERMINATION OF A DIETER

(Reflections for Lent '73)

II Tim. 2:1-3

Matt. 16:21-28

Parallels: Mark 8:31-38

Luke 9:21-27

Losing weight or dieting has become quite a common pastime in our country. Whether people want to capture the eternal look of youth or whether they are fleeing the ominous danger of a heart attack is not always known. But losing weight they are trying to do.

Some rationalize the situation by standing in front of a mirror and pulling in their stomachs, as they hold their breath, and then consider things aren't so bad after all. Some split a seam in their pants, and the blame is not put on the bulging flesh but on the manufacturers who don't make them like they use to. And, of course, if we are overweight we can always use the excuse that according to the charts we are just four inches too short.

But a lot of dieting is just full of sound and fury and signifying nothing. Most people go at it in short spurts and are not good at the long haul, which it takes. Everybody wants a pill that will handle the excess baggage and you can go happily on ... business as usual.

Yet the sincere weight-watcher knows that he must do his homework at the dinner table and also his road-work on the exercise course.

Maybe the Christian life is much like dieting. Sometimes we, too, look for shortcuts to the grace of God just like dieters want a crash-diet. Guess we have got to admit that both Christian living and dieting take discipline and balance.

Progress for the dieter comes with burning up

more calories than taking in. Progress in faith for the Christian comes when intake of God's power experiences an out-put of a Christlike life. Thus, progress for the dieter or Christian is not realized without struggle.

This brings a story to mind. An amateur naturalist was observing an emperor moth slowly and laboriously making its way from the chrysalis stage. Day by day it struggled, strove, and squirmed its way, trying desperately to emerge from the cocoon. As the amateur naturalist watched this painful looking process he could almost hear the cry of an unborn babe, "I want to be born, I want life now!"

So he decided that the only gallant thing to do was to attempt to help this moth in the process of being born. So he took his pen knife and ever so carefully he cut the narrow end of the cocoon so that it would be easier for the moth to be born. He seemed to think that such a harsh struggle for life should be made easier . . . and as quickly as possible.

Well, the moth was born sooner. The conflict was over quickly and the moth emerged into the new strange world. But there was a problem . . . a big one. The moth was feeble and frail . . . and its wings were not fully developed. It was unable to cope with its new environment, and it became a victim of its ground enemies. That naturalist, by too much "kindness," had become an enemy of the moth. He had deprived the moth of the strength that comes only by the struggle of being born.

Struggle then is often God's and nature's way of development and strength. A man needs mountains to climb, obstacles and challenges to meet in order to attain full maturity. By trying always to make life easy, we are unwittingly depriving ourselves and others of the satisfaction that comes only with intentional, progressive struggle.

Arnold Toynbee said: "It is difficulties and obstacles that lead to the flowering of a civilization."

So Paul says: "Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." Jesus says: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

The "good things" of life are often realized through struggle ... whether they be the necessity of losing weight or living the Christian life.

Lent this year might be a time for affirming the positive value of struggle. As we recapture the struggle of Jesus' suffering we do so with the realization that new life. . . new vitalities ... yes, resurrection followed.

Struggle then often leads to resurrection.

Forgiveness is struggle.  
God's love shared is struggle.  
"Lord have mercy" is struggle.  
Peace is not devoid of struggle.  
Healing is not without struggle.

New life must often first encounter death.

We struggle together in Lent with the hope and promise of finding and experiencing Easter -- some forty days away, but not only then.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Luth Church of the Master, Troy  
February 23, 1977

"A RADICAL RETURN"

"We plead on Chrst's behalf: let God change you from enemies into friends." II Cor 5:20b

Literally amazing, isn't it? Not only do we gather for a sabbath observance -- but you and I have also voluntarily come again for Lent. Yes, amazing. But why Lent? What's so special about this season??

Obviously, it has many reasons for observance. It offers us an opportunity to share in the passion of Christ; it is walking to Jerusalem to suffer and die with him.

Lent gives us an opportunity to practice self-denial. In an age which says we should be easy on ourselves -- in an age whose motto is indulge yourself - stuff yourself to overflowing - do not deny yourself or deprive yourself - you live only once, so live it up and have a good time -- ALONG comes Lent, encouraging what the world calls foolish: self-denial.

Yes, Lent brings us closer to Christ by concentrating on the cross -- what led to it, and what its deeper meanings are.

Lent is observed because there can not truly be a meaningful Easter without Lent. If there is no cross, there can be no crown. If there is no dying with Him, there can be no rising with Him. So Lent is a time for a closer walk with God.

But there is one key word which simply can't be overlooked in Lent: REPENTANCE. That simply means a radical reorientation of one's life, a turning about from Satan to God; quite simply, A RADICAL RETURN -- radical meaning the very roots -- returning to the roots of life to be nourished by the most basic: the root of love.

But why?? Why do we need to set aside a special time of repentance -- of returning. Why return? WHY REPENT?

The end of our pilgrimage in Lent gives the answer: the cross. The cross reminds us of the end result of life WITHOUT repentance -- without renewal from God. It's always the same-- without repentance life always leads to crucifixion, to brokenness, surely to spiritual death, and sometimes to physical death.

Yes, Lent is that important reminding time that all human iniquity converged upon God. And only he can release humanity from its miserable state of brokenness.

That's repentance--returning to him; and receiving his power -- a power which enables us to aggressively love instead of tearing down and crucifying.

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Yes - repentance leads to reconciliation. And that's what Paul exhorts us toward in his 2nd Corinthian letter. He says in turning to God, we are renewed -- our relationships need no longer be broken -- we ~~need~~ no longer be enemies, but ~~now~~ friends. His power of love aggressively sets right relationships that have gone wrong.

That's why Paul says ~~we~~, don't let that kind of power be wasted.

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Each of us has returned. For 40 days we will see the cross ahead of us. How radical will we make this return?? Will ~~we~~ just observe Lent, or will our repentance take on a flesh and bone reality?

Each of us has or knows of a broken relationship -- whether between man or God. How will this Lent change that? Will God's grace be wasted? Or will we respond as if radically changed -- changed to our very roots -- changed by God so that he and we are friends -- likewise, so that our enemies may now be friends.

AMEN

ASH WEDNESDAY

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

2-8-78

"GETTING PAST THE GAP"

"We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends." 2 Cor 5:20b

(My special thanks to Pastor Dennis Anderson for his insight and inspiration leading to this sermon.)

Ash Wednesday - the beginning of Lent. Over the centuries - this day has traditionally saw the church concentrating on one of our greatest problems -- the yawning gap between what God wants me to be - and what I actually am. Yes, that's my greatest problem - that gap caused by my sin. That gap can drive me (and often does drive me) into guilt, anxiety, and once and a while even depression.

Ash Wednesday is appropriately named for the fact that on this day WE STOP fleeing -- we stop hurrying down the corridors of life in order to recognize ONE EVERLASTING FACT OF LIFE : From ashes to ashes, dust to dust. That's us! From maternity ward to mortuary that is the course of our lives.

We don't like to face up to it -- we can't stand to admit that we are limited -- that we have shortcomings. And that's part of the gap -- we just don't like to admit WHO WE REALLY ARE! We don't want to admit that there really is a gap between us and God -- between what we are and what we ought to be.

But when we finally do face that gap -- then we know the reality of GUILT . And even though many Americans are trapped by this BIG-G (guilt), they don't want to admit it. Americans have invented all kinds of words to help them escape the word "guilt" - we call it nervous problems, or neurosis, or gastro-intestinal attacks -- but never guilt .

Dr. Karen Horney, a psychiatrist, describes three ways that we have tried to handle this gap caused by sin which we call guilt. She says we can move against it - in other words, REBEL. Or - you can move away from it -- that's running away or cove up.

Or Thirdly, the healthy way, you can move toward it In the church, we've called this third approach CONESSION. That is the only way to overcome the gap. That's the way we become eternal friends in Christ. Jesus condemned hypocrisy, not because it's the worst sin, but because it's a method of running away FROM WHO WE REALLY ARE.

That's why Jesus says "beware of those who practice their piety in public" -- because usually it's a cover-up for what's really inside. Very often these people ARE FULL-UP with guilt. They never take the time to really unlcad -- to confess their shortcomings

To some extent -- all of us are indicted by Jesus' warning about public piety. We all cover-up our shortcomings -- which really means, we shut off any chance of God or anyone else helping us. We've all known self-righteous people-- and we've all known how difficult it is to help them.

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How sad that we have made such a case of rotten apples out of our naturally feelings of guilt. GUILT is God's in-built smoke-detector -- it's God's warning or alarm system calling us to get things straightened out. Guilt is the alarm that drives us back to God.

There are no short-cuts to reconciliation - to becoming friends with God. There have always been three steps in the process of forgiveness, or reconciliation.

The first step is repentance -- which is the opposite of hardness of heart. Repentance is the deep desire to change. Alcoholics never like hang-overs -- but NOT until they radically change their drinking habit WILL THEY BE HEALED of their hangovers.

None of us like the hangover of guilt -- but that does not change until we put on the brakes that cause the guilt condition.

The second step is confession. As already stated, the opposite of confession is hypocrisy. Confession is facing up to the responsibility of admitting a share in sin - it's putting a stop to rationalizing and covering up.

The final step is MAKING SATISFACTION. When Zacchaeus was forgiven by Jesus -- he repaid those he had wronged. If we have really accepted God's forgiveness -- then we will DESIRE to make amendment for our wrongs.

~~BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT GOD OFFERS FORGIVENESS~~ BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT GOD OFFERS FORGIVENESS, we can take these three steps. First, God offers us his forgiving friendship -- and because of that we can repent, confess, and make amendment for our wrongs.

It is through that process that we get over the gap of guilt. God forgives through Jesus Christ -- our response is TO REPENT, TO CONFESS, AND TO MAKE AMENDMENT for the injustices we have caused.

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This process does not take place on a surgery table -- but begins as we gather around this Table of the Lord. He offers us forgiveness, in order that we might lay our load of guilt upon him .

That's the way God changes us from enemies into his friends. And that's the only way we can become eternal friends with each other -- and get beyond the gaps of guilt that often come between us.

Come - receive God's gift of friendship -- and then give it to one another -- always repenting, confessing, and making amendment for the hurts you have caused.

AMEN



ASH WEDNESDAY

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

February 28, 1979

"GIVING UP or BECOMING?"

"For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor. 5:21

Traditionally, Lent is a time of individual sacrifice -- it is the forty day period, not counting Sundays, before Easter. The forty days were chosen to parallel the forty days Jesus was in the wilderness preparing for his own ministry. So Lent, like Advent, is another time of Christian preparation.

But preparation for what? For many people ~~this 40 day period can~~ <sup>has</sup> been summarized in the question: What are you giving up for Lent? Yes,

Lent for many has been a time for GIVING UP something.

Most of us in this room have been involved in that kind of Lent -- we've prepared for Easter by giving up something during lent. That has often been the pious way to prepare for Easter. But when we stop to think about it -- most of those self-denials all too often inspired people to look MORE AT THEMSELVES than to look at God or their neighbor.

Giving up things may be a good, healthy discipline -- but it's a shallow, often self-righteous, preparation for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Instead of the question: What are you giving up for Lent? a more appropriate Lenten question is - Who are you becoming <sup>during these 40 days and after?</sup> This is a question which allows for growth and challenge! Christians do not whittle away at life, giving up something here -- making a little sacrifice there.

Instead Christians dream! ~~WE~~ grow! WE

reach out beyond ourselves -- we seek to envision new potentials and possibilities for our mission. We deepen our dedication - rather than merely give something up for forty days and forty nights.

As Christians - we are always moving toward the fulfillment of being like Christ -- we are seeking to discover the fullness of discipleship-- forever trying to be more fully human in the same authentic way that Jesus was fully human.

To be a Christian is not to be guilt-ridden with giving-up things -- but rather to be uplifted by Christ toward MORE FULLY GIVING OF MY WHOLE SELF.

The true disciple does not fret and fume for forty days about his waistline -- but he does grow in those forty days TO BE FAR MORE CONCERNED about the malnourished in America and all over the world.

As Paul says - Lent offers us an intense opportunity TO IDENTIFY MORE DEEPLY WITH THE HUMANITY OF JESUS -- with a man WHO TOOK UPON HIMSELF the righteousness of God -- who died not for personal glory, but for the sake of bringing the whole world back to a proper relationship with God. Yes, Lent enables us A MOMENT TO LOOK MORE INTENSELY AT CHRIST -- and in so doing come closer TO THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.

Lent helps us to see that our ~~vain little~~ pious acts of giving up something here ~~or~~ of making a little sacrifice there -- THAT THESE ARE SO SMALL when compared to the righteousness of God in the life of Jesus.

Lent frees us from becoming dependent upon our own little pious sacrificial acts ... Lent opens us up to the ONE SACRIFICIAL ACT that heals our relationship with God forever -- the righteous act of Christ for our sake!!

Lent reminds us that we are disciples NOT BECAUSE WE OWE GOD SOMETHING -- not because we are giving up something -- but we are disciples out of thanksgiving FOR SOMEONE -- namely the Christ of the cross of Calvary!

Lent helps us make sense out of discipleship... we learn that we follow Christ because he integrates life -- his love gives purpose and direction to our living -- his sacrifice frees us from being forever guilt-ridden -- his life leads us to a vision of the fullness of humanity -- to what a responsible and mature human life is all about!

Yes - Lent frees us from our own temptation to parade our piety -- frees us from trying to win God's favor through giving up this or that.

And in place of these hypocritical acts - Lent helps us look up to God ... helps us be more thankful for his righteous love for us through Jesus Christ -- helps us GIVE THANKS JOYFULLY without the vanity of sack cloth and ashes -- YES -- LENT HELPS US BECOME DISCIPLES seeking to share the righteous love of God.

Lent helps us NOT TO GIVE UP -- but TO GIVE TO OTHERS ... just as Christ has given to us.

I hope and pray this Lent will help you and me GIVE TO OTHERS in a new way -- just as we are going to sing a new song to God during this Lent!

AMEN

ASH WEDNESDAY  
Hope Lutheran, Toledo  
February 20, 1980

## "NOW OR LATER?"

For God says, 'At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.' Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. 2 Cor 6:2

The Rev. Carveth Mitchell tells a delightful, visionary story of a man who dreamed that he was sitting in the executive chambers of the evil spirits. The evil spirits were seated around the large board room table. And they were discussing a very significant issue of corporate headquarters: Namely: how they were going to destroy the souls of men.

As they were silently reflecting - one of Satan's staff members announced: "I've got the way."

And Satan asked: "What is your strategy?"

The staff member answered: "I will go to the earth and tell men that the Bible is only a fable - only a collection of fairy tales -- merely the foolish speculation of ancient men, and not the word or wisdom of God."

Satan replied: "Do you think you could get men to believe that?!? There's too much life and truth in it for that. Everyone who seriously studies it can see without doubt that it's the work of God and not men. Just read the Sermon on the Mount-- men would never devise such a high standard of righteousness and love.

Then a second staff member interrupted: "Let me go, Satan, I will persuade them that Christ was only a man -- a good man -- but only a man who was relevant for his own day."

"Fool!!" cried the executive chief of devils. "Do you think the living flesh of God can be buried overnight by a few words from you?!?"

And so a third staff member came to the rescue and said: "I've got the perfect idea. I will tell them there is no God - no Savior -- no hell and no heaven. They'll surely fall for that one!"

Satan responded: "Nonsense! Do you think your word can stifle the flame of hope in the human breast? Do you think you can negate centuries of human conscience with one stroke? Your plans are nothing new -- primitive as ever!"

Then a fourth staff member arose, and with the wisdom of a serpent, he said: "Let me go to the world of men and I will tell them that there is a God - that there is a Savior - that there is a hell and heaven -- that there is an eternal life - that there is salvation. BUT, I will tell them that there is no hurry! Tomorrow will do. Tomorrow and tomorrow will be soon enough.

And Satan, the chief executive beamed with delight: "You're my man! That's for certain the message that humanity will believe and follow!"

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Friends in Christ - that staff member of the devil has been hawking his wares in the world ever since. He has been a most effective sales representative! Because of him there are thousands of half-committed Christians who sit on the sidelines of faith. There are hundreds of preoccupied parishioners who dot the rolls of the church -- but that's the extent of their faith-life.

For thousands of good men and women on earth - "Later" is their watchword to every call of commitment. Plenty of time for that tomorrow! Maybe next week - maybe next year! I'm all for God and the Church - but don't ask for any commitments from me NOW!"

Against this fantasy of faith, St. Paul cries out: "BEHOLD, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!"

In watching the Winter Olympics over this past week - it has become so obvious how these athletes have NOT WASTED a single day in their conditioning. They live their lives with a grateful and dedicated discipline. They recognize the tremendous athletic gift they've been given -- so each day becomes a day to keep that gift in good condition.

These athletes live each day realizing that "now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation." If they lived with a "tomorrow is soon enough" attitude, they would be washed up **IN NO TIME!** They realize they have been graced with athletic ability -- and they respond daily to that gift BY KEEPING IT IN CONDITION!

God has graced us with his gift of ~~Jesus~~ <sup>Jesus Christ.</sup> Much like natural athletic ability -- ~~His~~ <sup>His</sup> power of forgiveness, of mercy, of compassion gets pretty flabby when it is not exercised every day. Every time we wait 'til tomorrow to exercise God's will-- ~~the world~~ <sup>the world</sup> around us has ~~becomes more~~ <sup>becomes more</sup> ~~Satanic, and~~ <sup>Satanic, and</sup> ~~less Christlike.~~ <sup>less Christlike.</sup> Each time we put God off until tomorrow - we are telling the world how unimportant God is **TODAY, AND EVERY DAY!**

There's a story of a young reporter who was covering his first big story. He had just returned to the press room after covering a sensational meeting between two heads of state. As he sat down at the typewriter - he was so excited his hands could hardly find the keys.

Seeing his excitement - a veteran reporter laid his hand on his shoulder and said: "Take your time, son! We go to press in six minutes."

The message was clear for that young reporter: It was either Now or Never! Six minutes to write

the biggest story of his young career. Six minutes to seize the opportunity -- or six minutes to sit in apathy, and say to himself: "Well, tomorrow will be another day -- I'll try again then."

**THE** facts are for that young reporter -- and for each of us -- tomorrow may not offer that ~~same~~ opportunity! Or worse yet, tomorrow may be too late!

Paul says: NOW IS THE ACCEPTABLE TIME! God says thru Paul: Now is the day of salvation! NOW IS THE TIME to write the story of God's love in your life. Now is the time to listen to the still small voice of God! Now is the time to forgive and to be forgiven! Now is the time to offer mercy to the hungry and helpless in our world! Now is the time to thank God for his abundant blessings! Now is the time to turn from our wicked ways - and return to the Lord! Now is the time - during this Lent - to be transformed by God's compassion! Now is the time to look to the cross of Calvary -- and then say: How have I sacrificed for the sake of my family, God's family, and the suffering families of this world??

To all this - Satan responds: "There is no hurry! Tomorrow will be soon enough! You can wait 'til later to get involved with God and his people! Plenty of time - don't worry about it!"

But God replies: "Now - right now - is the acceptable time to accept my love ... and to commit your life anew to following me!"

**IS THE NOW TIME**

Lent offers us a special time to renew our commitment to following our Lord - and to do it NOW! Thanks be to God that tonite - you have responded to your Lord - and not to the corporate staff of the devil -- putting off God's grace until tomorrow! *God help us to make his righteous and forgiving life our way of life* **AMEN** Now and after we leave here.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

March 7, 1984

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"AND WHEN YOU PRAY ..."

Prayer is definitely out of the closet these days. It's been promoted on street corners ... on the steps of the Capitol in Washington D.C., ... and it appears that it will soon re-enter the classroom through a legislative vote. There's no doubt about it -- prayer is making the headlines. Yesterday it made the front page of the Blade. On the same day - I was called by an investigative reporter of WTOL, Channel 11 - to offer a religious perspective to the Prayer in Public School debate. I gave her a 15 minute video-taped interview; not quite 5 seconds of that interview made it onto the airwaves. But even that 5-seconds was wrapped into a major story on "prayer" -- a subject hardly considered newsworthy most of the time by television.

On the one hand - I suppose we "religious folks" should be all excited about this emphasis on prayer. After all, when has prayer ever received so much public attention. Even within our churches and synagogues, prayer rarely gets so much focus! So maybe we should just jump on the political bandwagon of prayer like thousands of evangelicals are doing these days. After all, it all sounds so pietistic ... so righteous ... so religiously authentic. Let's impress our society on "how prayerfully religious we really are!"

And Jesus says to his intimate followers: "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; ... And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners that they may be seen by other people. Truly, I say, they have their reward."

I think Jesus would rephrase that statement a little today. It might go something like this: And when you pray, you must not be like the politicians -- for they love to parade prayer in public places and make prayer into a political issue. Truly, I say, they will have their reward in the voting booths, but not from my Father in heaven.



This text from Matthew -- which is always the appointed text for Ash Wednesday -- could not be more timely for our society as well as our Lenten observance. Because aside from its deep faith value -- it also has something very directly to say to our society ... to our civic authorities .. and to all the political hoopla going on about prayer.

Its first message for the world is that PRAYER IS A VERY ESSENTIAL AND INTIMATE DIALOG WITH GOD ... AND I emphasize, with God! Prayer is something that is to be ALWAYS encouraged, whether in home, school, industry, or corporate headquarters. But Jesus graphically makes clear that prayer is not to be turned into a public issue -- to be paraded around on placards or made into a militant public display in our centers of government.

Jesus would be aghast if he saw that "prayer" was being made into a political platform, regardless of whether its by Democrats or Republicans. Prayer is a deeply complex and profound religious matter ... but both Jesus and the Lutheran Confessions would have serious reservations regarding the political legislation of prayer.

The whole issue of Prayer in Public Schools dramatically illustrates the serious precaution that Jesus voiced in the Sermon on the Mount about Christian piety. It is fitting as we begin Lent that Jesus gives us clarification about our prayer life ... about our sacrificial life ... about our Christian piety in general. And his direction is simple: He is against superficial religiosity. He is against making faith into a big show! He is against parading our prayerful piety in public places IN ORDER THAT OTHERS MIGHT SEE HOW RIGHTEOUS WE ARE!

Jesus was deeply angered by this kind of parade of piety because that's exactly what he saw from the religious establishment of his day. The Pharisees were experts at practicing public piety. Jesus called them "hypocrites" -- meaning that they were good actors. They played the part well for the public eye -- but there was no depth in their piety. It was all for show! It was all so that others could see and hear and be impressed! It was not for the real purpose of prayer, namely -- to deepen our trust in God ... to grow in his grace ... to struggle to find His direction for our lives. The object of prayer for the Pharisees was NOT God, but merely other people. The

Pharisees were not concerned about the substance of prayer... they were merely concerned about superficial form ... about looking piously religious!

I fear that much of the same motivation lurks behind all this politicking for prayer in our own society. Are we really interested in the prayer life of our children??? Then why aren't we praying in our homes?!? Do we really want our children to have serious dialog with God?? Then why would we leave such important dialog in the hands of a public school teacher ... whose prayer-life may be non-existent?!? Are we really serious that public schools should be the theological forum for inculcating meaningful prayer life?!? Since when have parents abdicated their Christian responsibility to the public schools?!? The facts are that in many Christian homes families don't even take time to share a table prayer. And yet those same families would entrust their children to someone else's agenda for prayer. Is it any wonder that our children are getting double messages these days?!?

Jesus says ... Beware of practicing your piety before others. Instead, go to your room to pray where God will hear you in private. Be assured, Jesus is not against public prayer ... nor even against prayer in public places. But he is strongly cautioning us against a pretentious prayer-life... where we make religion and prayer and faith into a show for others!

Ash Wednesday and Lent have been structured into the church's life to give us a disciplined example of a deeper piety than superficial things. That's why we call Lent a time for deeper self-examination. Not because God wants us to feel more guilty ... or more pitiful. But rather because God desires that our piety be more than skin deep -- more than merely showing off for others.

Lent is that time to take a hard, deep look at our prayer life ... at our almsgiving ... at all of our religious practices. It is a time to take an inventory of things -- to repent from those things that are being done just for show. It is a time to look away from ourselves and our selfish appetites, and to look more deeply to God. It is a time to halt the trumpeting of our self-righteousness -- and to look with deeper appreciation to the righteousness which God has given us in Jesus Christ.

It is a time to rend our hearts ... and not merely our outer garments. It is a time to get under the surface of things ... and let God take hold of us from within. Let God take hold of our hearts, and not merely a token gift from our wallets.

Lent is a very appropriate time for prayerful renewal -- for rejoicing and agonizing in prayer that goes so much deeper than mere political sloganeering. Lent is that greatest time to PRAYERFULLY ponder God's greatest gift to you and to me: the sacrificial life of his Son.

Lent is that time to prayerfully give thanks that God continues to forgive me even for my superficial piety ... even for my inadequate prayer life ... even for my less than gracious concern for the poor ... even for my unfaithfulness to Him, to my family, and to anyone who has become alienated from me.

Lent is a time to prayerfully consider a painful subject -- namely, how much am I rebelling against God. It is a time to prayerfully give thanks that God even forgives my rebellion ... and thru Christ, reconciles and renews me. Lent is a time to prayerfully consider the meaning of sacrifice -- and to give thanks to God that his sacrifice was far more than a superficial political gesture.

Yes, Lent is a time to get deeper than superficial shows or superficial passions. To prayerfully look at those things in life which really count -- not merely a time to be consumed by those things that moths and rust will consume. Above all - Lent is a time to look squarely into the face of death -- and not to be afraid of it.

For it is through the Lenten journey that we have come to know that death is not the end of life with God. In the death of Christ on the cross - each of us has been relieved from the burdens of guilt... and piety ... and perfect prayers ... and all our other religious good deeds.

Our prayers ... our piety ... our almsgiving ... all of these and many more are still essential responses of our faith. But they are not done to impress anyone else... they are not done to gain favor with God or the politicians of this world. They are done in thankfulness for what Christ has first done for all of us -- SAVED US FROM OUR  
SUPERFICIAL PIETY!

So let us return to the proper arena of prayer this Lent.  
Let us return to the Lord our God, for he is gracious and  
merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

AMEN

ASH WEDNESDAY  
Hope Luth Church, Toledo  
March 4, 1981

"GETTING READY FOR WHAT?"

Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...

Joel 2:13

We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends. ... This is the hour to receive God's favor; today is the day of salvation.

2 Cor. 5:20, 6:2

The past three days the Detroit Free Press has been carrying a series on a new group (I prefer calling it a cult) that's fast gaining popularity in America. A little over a week ago -- the entire Lou Grant show was devoted to this new cult -- called "Survivalists."

Allow me to quote from the article to give you a little insight into this new cult.

Small but growing bands of Americans are arming themselves and learning how to kill because they are convinced the social order is crumbling and they will have to fend for themselves to survive.

They include many middle Americans who are re-mortgaging their homes to pay for guns and shooting lessons for their families. They are professional men who are accumulating arsenals in homes and strongholds scattered throughout the Southeastern woodlands -- the Midwestern suburbs -- and the remote Western ranches and mountain cabins.

No official figures exist on the number of people involved (many will not allow interviews) -- but William Pier, a California survival distributor, claims he has more than 200,000 family names on his nationwide mailing list. He netted more than a million dollars in profit last year selling freeze-dried food.

A Washington Computer specialist predicts that "Survivalism" will be one of the great growth industries in the 80's.

Going beyond the bomb shelter craze of the 50's and 60's, this group advocates extreme action and violence. Allan Croft, a foreman in Northern Georgia says -- "if nuclear war comes, I hope everyone in the cities is killed." Cause if they come out here expecting to be fed, they'll probably be shot.

In Tigerton, Wisc., the group calls itself the Posse Comitatus which literally means, "The Power of the County." The group stacks semi-automatic military rifles in their gun racks at home and carry 45's in their pockets around town.

This group has formed what they call the Life Science Church. They donate they land, their personal property-- even their guns to the so-called church. Some of them, declaring that the church owns all their property, then file for welfare. And they say that since the church owns their guns, they can't be arrested for illegal possession of firearms.

What does all this have to do with Lent ... and particularly Ash Wednesday. It has much to do with it BECAUSE IT REPRESENTS A MOVEMENT WHICH IS DIAMETRICALLY CONTRARY to our Christian faith ... and particularly contrary to the theme of Lent and Ash Wednesday.

Let's just take a brief look at three of the major purposes of the "Survivalist Cult" in America and compare that with the beliefs of Christianity. What are these two groups GETTING READY FOR.

## *SURVIVAL CULT: GETTING READY FOR ...*

- 1.) TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF -  
(To hell with everyone else)*
- 2.) Aim of life: SURVIVAL*
- 3.) TURN AGAINST GOD + ANYONE ELSE  
WHO SEEKS YOUR AID.*

## CHRISTIAN FAITH: GETTING READY FOR

- 1.) DENYING YOURSELF - take up your cross and follow me.
- 2.) Aim of life: To serve God and others, even if it means sacrifice.
- 3.) RETURN TO GOD AND OTHERS  
ASSURED OF FRIENDSHIP

Both Joel and St. Paul in tonite's lessons plead to God's people to RETURN TO THEIR GOD ... to GET READY to receive God's friendship and love in order that it might be shared amidst the fears of the world.

Contrary to all popular notions -- Lent has never been needed so much as it is needed today.

Our society is filled with paranoia. Far too many of its people have become hate-filled and greed-oriented. Violence has become a by-product of our civilization. And among cults like the Survivalists -- it is being preached as the way, the truth, and the life.

Lent offers us an opportunity to GET READY FOR THE REAL LIFE -- the life that God has prepared for us with Christ. God has said - now is the time to get ready for your eternal life, not merely a life of survival.

"Take and eat; Take and drink" receive my loving friendship, and then offer it to one another ... and everyone in need.

AMEN

ASH WEDNESDAY  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor  
March 4, 1987

## "WHAT IS LENT?"

"Yet even now, return to the Lord with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love ... Joel 2:12-13

Today we again begin our Lenten pilgrimage toward the cross and resurrection. But what difference does it make? Is this pilgrimage really important anymore? Is it just a worn out ritual that we are still trying to breathe life into? Has "Lent" been on the respirator for years -- and everyone is afraid to pull the plug??

That was certainly the feeling I got this past week when picking tonight's bulletin. A very pleasant, young saleswoman at the Christian Bookstore politely asked: "Can I help you?" I said, "Yes, I'd like bulletin stock for Ash Wednesday or Lent." And immediately she said: "What's that? What is Ash Wednesday?" I said, "It's the first day of Lent." And she quickly responded: "What Is Lent??"

At first I was flabbergasted -- a Christian bookstore representative that doesn't know about Lent. Wow! But then she summoned a more elderly saleswoman, and asked: "Have you ever heard of Lent?" And the gray-haired lady quickly responded: "Oh yes, that's a time that people give something up." Now I was really getting depressed. Two women in the business of selling religious resources -- and neither had a very meaningful understanding of Lent.

But the more I thought about it - the more I realized that probably a majority of folks agree with that gray-haired salesperson. "LENT IS A TIME TO GIVE SOMETHING UP." Over the centuries, Lent has changed dramatically from its original period of preparing people for Holy Baptism -- that's why Lent began ... to prepare candidates for Baptism on Easter. But the church and its people have brutally ritualized the season INTO SUPERFICIAL FORMS -- INTO GIVING UP THINGS!

There was a time when flowers were forbidden during Lent; weddings definitely were banned from Lent; public entertainment could not be enjoyed during Lent; no dancing or card playing during Lent; abstinence from meat, dairy products, and eggs was mandated ... thus, the tradition of Shrove Tuesday ... a time to use up all the fat, eggs, meat and dairy products with pancake suppers or donut bananzas. Organ music was stopped. Even to this day, "Alleluias" are not to be sung in the liturgy during Lent.



LENT HAD BECOME SYNONOMOUS WITH "GIVING UP THINGS" -- OBSERVING THE PROPER EXTERNAL FORMS. Has anything changed for us today?? Is that still the meaning of "Lent?" Is Lent merely an outward show of "weeping and mourning;" are we merely practicing our piety in order to be seen by others? Are we looking pious on the outside but still feeling rotten on the inside? Well I can't answer that for any of you -- but there is still a great temptation among church folk to make piety "an external thing!"

That has never been the real significance of Lent. The purpose of Lent today is no different than it was as early as the 3rd century: A TIME OF REPENTING (turning back to God) ... A TIME OF RECONCILING (a time of restored intimacy with God and his people) and A TIME OF RENEWAL -- OR WHAT I WOULD CALL TONITE "REJOICING." Or as our text says tonite - a time "to return to the Lord to rend our hearts and not merely our external things" ... a time to be changed and renewed from within.

Lent is a time of "repenting." Now doesn't that word sound passe in our sophisticated world. My catechism class laughs every time I say this word -- they think "repentance" is a joke ... because that's what our culture is teaching. Our culture basically says "we are always right ... don't ever let anyone tell you that you are wrong ... just let yourself go ... live it up ... don't worry about yesterday ... today is a new day ... after all, yesterday can't be changed, so forget about yesterday." The basic mentality is "live for this moment, and nothing else -- above all, don't be accountable to anyone else or any other authority -- you are your own boss ... you don't have to report to anyone!"

Well, Lent graphically reminds us that this mentality is a crock of manure! Lent reminds us that we are accountable to God and each other. Lent reminds us that we are called to live with integrity and courage -- which means that we face up to the yesterday's failures and confess them. That's Christian integrity -- not glossing over sin with false piety or superficial promises. Before resurrection, there is suffering and death ... there 's a coming to grips with sin and alienation. Lent reminds us that we cannot take a different course than our Lord. Before we will experience NEW LIFE, we must taste the DEATH -- we must die to our false pride and hypocrisy. LENT IS A TIME LIKE NO OTHER TIME WHEN WE WILLINGLY SEARCH DEEPLY TO REVEAL OUR OWN SYMPTOMS OF DEATH! Yes, it is a time we give something up -- namely, the garbage of our lives ... our deceit, our destructiveness, our distrust of God and his love!

Lent is like any surgery. Before we can be restored to new health, we must honestly face the symptoms of the disease

within us. The first remedy for illness is to seek a cure. To be well and whole, we must first admit that there are impurities in the system. That's what Lent is all about -- having the courage to admit that we have failed to be like God. Lent reminds us that God's way is not to cover-up the internal garbage with an exterior facade of goodness. Lent encourages us to confess sin, weakness, failure and faults -- because we are confident of God's mercy and forgiveness.

At this very moment, President Reagan is rehearsing his address to the American people regarding his involvement in the Iran-Contra deal. This night - this Ash Wednesday - he has one of the greatest opportunities to demonstrate the meaning of Lent. And that is simply to say (if it is true), "I too have sinned, and I prostrate myself before God and my fellow Americans ... I ask your forgiveness." I know one thing for certain -- God will readily "forgive him."

There will not be a new day for President Reagan's leadership or America without honest repentance. That's why Lent teaches us. And we all know from a previous administration in Washington -- that the new day for America comes very slowly without honest confession.

Yes, Lent is a time to come clean with God and each other. It is a time for returning to the Lord and rending our hearts ... and not merely outward things. And what will such honesty lead to? Repentance always yields reconciliation -- a new kind of harmony between God and his people. It shows that we take the gift of grace ... of forgiveness ... very seriously! We don't take it for granted!

How can you and I show that more graphically this Lent? One commentator has gone so far as to suggest that churches should set aside all "committee agendas" during Lent. Just make this a time of "thinking people." He says we should burn our agendas and Minutes and apply the ashes to each other. He suggests we make this time an opportunity to GROW TOGETHER IN UNDERSTANDING -- rather than a time of more reports and paper.

Maybe we can't fulfill that perfectly -- but we can make this Lent more relational oriented. It could be as simple as being more tolerant of other denominations. It could be a time where we build bridges between denominations. In a small way that's exactly what we will be doing here at Hope -- a film series between a Presbyterian and Lutheran congregation. But the issues of family and wholeness with God are the same for both denominations. So make this Lent a time of denominational and relational reconciliation.

Equally important, pray for those two people you

wrote on those pink cards. Pray that God's grace might become more meaningful in their lives these next 40 days. Pray that they might more faithfully worship God. And even go one step further -- invite one of them to join you this season at the Lenten series -- it might be the most significant reconciliation God has ever shown you. That's what it means to be certain "that God's grace is not given in vain -- that we seek to share it with those who may be avoiding it!

Finally, Lenten repentance and reconciliation always lead to renewal and great rejoicing. When you and I have used Lent for renewing ourselves from within -- then we should rejoice and be glad ... for that is the intent of Lent in the first place. Lent is a time to examine my life in light of God's grace -- is his forgiveness shining through? Lent is a time to more fully repent and be reconciled to God and others. And what will this self-examination really uncover? NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH! Namely, that the grave is not the ultimate goal of life. Granted, Lent will remind us that we shall return to dust. Lent reminds us that we cannot overcome death. But more important, it reminds us that death is not the last word of Lent. Lent leads from Golgatha's cross to the Garden's empty tomb. Lent reminds us that Jesus Christ has changed the gloominess of Golgatha to the eternal sunrise of Easter!

No longer do we come to Lent to merely focus upon a dismal or dreary death. Christ's death liberates us from any lasting guilt or grief. So we come to Lent to remind ourselves that we have great reason for rejoicing. There is no season in the Christian life that is without the joy of restoration and renewal. That's why we sing "Joyful, Joyful, we adore thee" tonite -- because Lent does not stop us from rejoicing in God's grace.

That's in fact why we have come back here again and again -- maybe even more in Lent. Because we are so hungry for the good news. We are thirsting for the news of God's righteousness to us -- his desire to forgive us ... his will to cleanse us from whatever is rotting inside of us.

So we blow the trumpet. We sanctify this fast. We call a solemn assembly. We gather the people and rejoice -- because we who were lost to sin, have been found in grace. We have returned to the Lord and revealed our innermost faults and failures. We have been made one with God and each other. And all this can only lead to rejoicing as we sing:

"Joyful, Joyful, we adore thee ..... AMEN.

ASH WEDNESDAY  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
February 13, 1991  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## W H A T ' S   Y O U R   P R A C T I C E ?

"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart ... and rend your hearts and not your garments."

Joel 2:12

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

Matthew 6:1

ASH WEDNESDAY - the first of 40 days for a Lenten inventory. Lent is a time to take inventory - to take a good look at oneself ... to assess our reasons for being Christians ... to repent from our obsession with our many idols & material gods ... to reconnect with God deeper than the superficial level of religiosity ... in short, to better integrate faith with daily practice.

Recently a business report announced that there are over 1,200 brands of shampoo for sale in the U.S. If I were to ask you to name as least five brands of shampoo, I'll bet that everyone here could do it with ease. But if I were to ask everyone "to name at least five things that could give us greater spiritual focus during Lent," I'm fearful we'd all have some trouble. We know how to take care of hair; but our hearts are quite another matter.

In tonite's gospel from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals the three traditional expressions of piety that connected faith to practice -- prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (benevolence). In his day, these practices were the epitome of piety. Times have changed, but prayer, fasting (or self-denial) and benevolence are still the major ways that a Christian practices piety. Most of us do not have any argument with these expressions of piety, but the real question esp. for Lent is: HOW SHALL WE PRACTICE OUR PRAYER, OUR SELF-DENIAL, AND OUR BENEVOLENCE?

In one way or another, we all practice these expressions of piety. We all pray, we all sacrifice (fast) and we all give to others (almsgiving). There is obvious diversity in the ways that we practice this piety, but that diversity is not only good, it is necessary. Some of us have more to give than others; and therefore some of us find it more easy to sacrifice; and some of us feel very comfortable in sharing prayers, while others are more reserved. Jesus has no argument with the diversity of our piety, but he does caution us strongly against SHODDY PRACTICES OF PIETY. And Lent is not only the ideal time to take inventory of our practices of piety, but esp. a time to REPENT OF ANY SHODDY PRACTICES.

SO, WHAT'S YOUR PRACTICE OF PRAYER, SACRIFICE, AND ALMSGIVING? Nearly ten years ago when I asked a similar question I illustrated the answer by comparing the practices of faith

with the practices of teenager playing football. Having been such a teenager, I'll use myself again TO ILLUSTRATE SHODDY PRACTICES OF FOOTBALL & FAITHFULNESS.

I first suited up as a football player in the 9th grade. I would like to say that the motivation for such practice was a deep love of the game. That was hardly the case. I was out on the gridiron for the glory that would come from the bleachers. This I call the "grandstanding approach to football." Here the young player puts on the gear merely to make an impression -- maybe to impress his parents, probably to impress his friends, but most definitely to impress the girls. Needless to say, this grandstanding approach totally loses sight of the WHOLE PURPOSE OF PLAYING FOOTBALL.

Jesus insinuates in the Sermon on the Mount that many Christians PRACTICE THEIR FAITH in much the same way -- they are grandstanding Christians. Believe me, I've seen far too many pastors whose motivation for parish ministry fits this category to a tee -- they're in the ministry to be seen, not to serve. Their aim is to parade their piety for congregational praise and applause.

To this kind of grandstanding, public-spectacle religion, Jesus says: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." Jesus says you will certainly receive short-term rewards for this practice -- you will get praise and applause, but you will not be rewarded by God "for you have already received your reward - you have served yourself." God's practice for faithful piety is that "we come not to be served, but to offer our lives as a ransom for others."

Well, when I was an 11th grader I finally overcame this grandstanding football practice. But my practice was still shoddy -- then I suited up because all of my friends were doing it; and I also did it because I was feeling guilty for not playing football as a 10th grader. So my motivation in the 11th grade was peer pressure on the one hand and guilt & past failure on the other hand.

Again, the whole purpose of football was being overshadowed by the wrong piety - the wrong motivation. I wasn't going out for the squad because of a deep belief and desire to play the game; I wasn't practicing from a deep, internal commitment. I was doing it just to satisfy my friends or just to make up for the mistakes of the previous year.

Again, Jesus points out this same practice among many Christians. He saw many disfiguring their faces and looking dismal in order to satisfy the people around them. How tragic when faithfulness is little more than "playing the game of looking pious for others to see." For decades that was the meaning of Lent for far too many -- Lenten faithfulness had become synonymous with looking sad, feeling bad, and acting drab. Dietary fasting, somber worship, morbid hymns, no weddings, no flowers - a rending of outward garments, but nothing relevant to the heart of Lent.

God never intended that Ash Wednesday or Lent should be a special time to look more sad or to "put on ashes because everyone else is doing it." The aim of our Lenten faith goes much deeper than what can be seen on the outside. God has not intended that we become humorless or morbid during this Lenten pilgrimage. His intent for Lent is far more radical than a few, external, cosmetic changes. God desires growth and renewal and revitalization and re-formation during this 40-day pilgrimage. That's why Hope has always offered programs like the one being presented by Dr. Samir AbuAbsi this year. We don't make sacrifices during Lent to impress others - we make the sacrifice of increased worship and study in order to become better equipped as God's essential players.

Which leads to God's real model for Lent and my last year in high school. As you might guess - I didn't play football as a 12th grader, because I finally got honest with myself -- I just didn't have what was needed to be a varsity player. I finally had learned as a 12th grader the real PURPOSE FOR SUITING UP -- TO OFFER ONE'S TALENTS NOT FOR PERSONAL GLORY ... NOT BECAUSE OF PEER PRESSURE OR MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE PAST ... BUT BECAUSE THEY WOULD UPLIFT, UNDERGIRD, AND BENEFIT THE WHOLE TEAM AND ITS CHANCES FOR VICTORY.

That's the kind of practice of piety that God encourages from us during Lent (as well as the whole year). Prayer, sacrifice (fasting) and almsgiving are not to be despised practices of Lent -- but they are to be done to glorify God and the mission of his team on earth, the holy Christian Church. Lent is that time, where as God's dedicated players, God calls us to return to the huddle and locker room for some added guidance, some further instruction, some expanded strategy and encouragement for the practicing of our faith. Lent is that time where we practice the piety of prayer, sacrifice, and almsgiving NOT FOR PERSONAL GLORY, NOT OUT OF PEER PRESSURE, BUT SIMPLY FOR THE BENEFIT OF A VICTORIOUS TEAM EFFORT FOR GOD'S SAKE IN THIS WORLD!

Ash Wednesday calls us to RETURN TO THE LORD, OUR COACH, to encounter the greatest example of faithful piety known to any of us, Jesus Christ. It was this same Jesus Christ who fasted for us, who prayed for us, and who loved us and died for us -- NOT FOR HIS PERSONAL GLORY, NOT OUT OF PEER PRESSURE, BUT TO ASSURE US THAT NOTHING IN ALL CREATION WOULD SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD. In response to his sacrificial love and forgiving example - we practice his faithfulness by caring for our bodies, by caring for our spirits, and by caring for our neighbors in a revitalized way during Lent. We don't do this for our own glory; we don't do this because other Christians are forcing us to do it; we don't do this because of failing to do it in the past. WE DO IT BECAUSE JESUS CHRIST HAS DEMONSTRATED THAT FAITHFULNESS TO HIS WAY, HIS TRUTH, AND HIS LIFE IS VICTORIOUS OVER ANYTHING THAT CAN EVER DEFEAT US, INCL. DEATH.

It's Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent - a time to return to the Lord, our God, for some additional coaching on the practices of staying in step with Jesus Christ, our Savior. For Lent is always a time to learn and practice, and to learn and practice, and to learn and practice how to best offer our bodies, our spirits, and our love for neighbor as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. And when you and I can say, NOW, THAT'S MY PRACTICE, then we will have known that we have rendered out hearts and not only our garments.

AMEN.

ASH WEDNESDAY  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
February 24, 1993  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "LENTEN PRACTICE = RENUNCIATION"

"Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."  
Joel 2:13 "Beware of practicing your piety before others to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." Matt. 6:1

Ash Wednesday - the first of 40 days devoted to a spring inventory (with 10 inches of snow adorning the ground). Lent is a time for inventory & self-assessment - a time to take a hard look at ourselves and our faith in God; a time to assess our reasons for being who we are as Christians; a time to relate our faith and life to our theology and practice ... and this year, a time to reflect upon our own ethical decision making and its relationship to our faith and life.

As we have learned in the last four weeks of Epiphany -- nothing quite outshines the Sermon on the Mount for relating faith to practice. So, again on Ash Weds., the gospel is the Sermon on the Mount and the issue is again one of relating faith to practice: HOW SHOULD A CHRISTIAN PROPERLY PRACTICE HIS OR HER PIETY??

As the Level III confirmands know so well -- in Jesus' day, the faithful practiced their piety in three ways: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. With the matter of almsgiving (giving to the poor) Jesus says do not sound a trumpet as the hypocrites do. That may sound like an exaggeration, but it was not! In the synagogue in Jesus' day, the amount donated and the donor's name was not only publicly announced -- when large amounts were donated, trumpets called attention to such large donations. Jesus urges his disciples to give in secret. In fact, it should be so secret he says that the left hand doesn't even know what the right hand is doing. He exaggerates to make a point: WE DON'T PRACTICE THE PIETY OF GIVING IN ORDER TO GET PUBLIC ACCLAIM & ATTENTION!!

Jesus urges the same thing with regard to prayer: again using a slight twist of hyperbole: he urges us to pray in total privacy. In other words, we pray not so that others can see how prayerful we are, but we pray so that God's will can be done and we can be strengthened to do it!!

And the same is true for fasting. He urges that we not make a public display of our fasting by disfiguring our faces. Obviously, that's one reason many devout Christians still have RESERVATIONS about the imposition of ashes on this day: it can easily be seen as a public show of fasting. Jesus instead says: "anoint your head and wash your face" ... in other words, act as if you are preparing for a feast, because true repentance is not only sorrow for sin but joy for a new way of life.



But to really see the implications of Lenten Practice, we must get beyond the superficial nature of these illustrations from Jesus and see the deeper point he is trying to make with his disciples. That point, which is more profound than almsgiving, or how one prays, or how one fasts, has to do with renunciation or self-denial. Jesus is inviting the disciples to renounce one's self as the discipline of the kingdom. In Holy Baptism, we ask parents and sponsors: DO YOU RENOUNCE ALL THE FORCES OF EVIL, THE DEVIL AND HIS EMPTY PROMISES?? When we were baptized, we promised to DAILY RENOUNCE THOSE FORCES OF EGO AND SELF-AGGRANDIZEMENT AND IDOLATRY AND SEEKING CREDIT FOR ONLY THE SELF! Lenten practice = renunciation: the constant crucifying of the old and bringing the new to life.

So what does that RENUNCIATION OF THE SELF really LOOK LIKE DURING LENT? Well first, it is much more than renouncing some petty practices. Too often people have simply thought that renunciation or self-denial is "giving up something for Lent!" So what we often see people practicing during Lent is renouncing some things of the body, or putting down some sexual desires, or denying ourselves certain foods, or giving away an extra dollar or two by sacrificing a dime a day in one of these Lenten self-denial cards.

Renunciation is not some petty gesture of giving something up for Lent -- it is the practice of renouncing a whole way of life and old selfish attitudes. I have heard a lot of joking about Clinton's budget and tax plan ... and there certainly may be many flaws and fopaws in his thinking. But there is one facet of his plan that deserves some credit: IT IS UPLIFTING A LIFESTYLE THAT HAS BECOME A LOST CONCEPT OF GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS AND EVEN RELIGION: SACRIFICE! It is the very religious spirit that this country was founded upon -- a willingness for its people to make sacrifices for the common good. It was a willingness of not expecting everything to be handed to us on a golden platter. And personally - I don't think Clinton has even gone far enough in his sacrificial thinking! Whether its lobbyists or those on welfare or the wealthy or foreign business interests or a multitude of other self-interest groups -- everybody is saying "go ahead and make your cuts, but just make certain that it doesn't affect me!" In short, we are living in an age and culture which is totally obsessed with SELF-POSSESSION! (You can take his stuff, but don't take my stuff!!).

Maybe the illustration will be better seen if we bring it a little closer to home. Regretably - I could not attend any of the Larson Hall sessions that related to the "Health Care Issues of the 90's" due to my Luth Heritage class. But the impression I had from all the talk I heard was that there was not a very vital spirit of renunciation in those first two sessions. What I was told is that everybody seemed to be pointing the finger at someone else. Obviously, there may be justifiable reasons to point the finger in several directions

- but Lent reminds us of A PROMISE OF RENUNCIATION WE MADE IN HOLY BAPTISM: DO YOU RENOUNCE THE FORCES OF EVIL, THE DEVIL AND ALL HIS EMPTY PROMISES?? One of the greatest forces of evil today is the obsession w/ self-interest; self-possession! How can we ever reduce health care costs when everyone is always guarding his or her own turf with fists clenched?! How can we ever expect to balance our national budget and reduce the deficit when the obsession with self-interest makes it impossible for anyone to honestly say "enough is enough!"

Lent calls us to begin our inventory and preparation for the celebration of Easter -- for a new way of life!! Nothing that we do in Lent will make us more acceptable to God. God has already accepted us and forgiven us in the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ! Our practice of piety is to glorify God not so much by GIVING UP SOMETHING but by TAKING UP SOMETHING in Lent -- namely, taking up the cross ... being willing to renounce those ways and attitudes in which we have become totally self-centered ... totally self-obsessed ... forever self-consumed with "getting ours" and who cares about anyone else.

As we all know - real healing and wholeness can only begin when each of us confesses his or her own part in creating the cancers of our world. Self-centeredness and self-consumption have become the cancers of our age. Let us begin to celebrate Easter on Ash Wednesday by renouncing those obsessions of mind, matter, and money which seek first our own glory rather than the goodness of God's kingdom and the common good of everyone else in it!!

AMEN

ASH WEDNESDAY  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
March 1, 1995  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "BEWARE OF YOUR POSTURE!"

*"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." Matt. 6:1*

People today spend an unhealthy amount of time "posturing." And we all know what I mean by "Posturing" -- passing ourselves off to be something we are not. We drop names; we mention places; we reference activities or fashionable name brands; we give temporal things (like winning a basketball game) eternal significance. In a world of high profile marketing -- most of us do better with the 11th Commandment than we do with the first ten: "You shall posture yourself with the best of them!"

Robin Williams, playing the extraordinary teacher in *Dead Poets' Society*, really offered a stunning challenge to this kind of posturing. On his first day of the school term, he invited his class into the hall to view the display cases holding the photos of each graduating class. He instructed the boys to look closely at some of the young men pictured in the oldest photographs. Then he said: "*Carpe Diem*" ... "*Carpe Diem*" ... "*Sieze the day!*" He was telling the boys that all those young men in the pictures are now dead. They were once young men in their prime bursting with hope and energy. But now their time was past and they were dead. "They are," said Williams, "worm food." The message he offered those boys was simply: "Beware of your posture in life! Do not make yourself into a god! Do not think that your present virility and power will be everlasting! **Sieze this moment to thank, serve and obey God!**"

Ash Wednesday sends the same message: "Beware of your posture ... before God, before others, before yourself!" Whether it is literally a part of tonight's liturgy or not, the name "Ash Wednesday" presses us to feel the smear of dead and burned life on our foreheads as we hear the words: "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return." (**No ashes - too showy!**) Ash Wednesday seeks to put our existence into proper perspective. It reminds us that the day shall come when we shall be dust again ... ashes ... worm food.

My intent nor the intent of this day is not to make us depressed; this vision of Lent has long been buried. But Ash Wednesday is **for religious people** ... a day for the pious ... but especially a day **to caution the pious** about their posturing. A day to remind the religious to **BEWARE OF THEATRICALS IN RELIGION**. Because we are all tempted by this kind of hypocrisy. And in tonight's gospel, Jesus rails against people of faith whose practice of religion is **mere show**. Giving alms, praying, and fasting were and still are noble expressions of faith. But when the amount of the gift, or the eloquence of the prayer, or the severity of the fast are presented for others to see, then the integrity of the discipline is lost. No matter what we do as religious people -- **if we do it**

## Page 2 - Beware of Your Posture

**merely to impress others**, then we've had our reward: **their compliments!** But God is not impressed with such posturing; in fact, he despises a show-off religion! Because it's purpose is to impress others rather than to reflect either a change of heart ... or a conviction of the heart!

How can I briefly illustrate this whole matter on this nite? Well, what do you make of all the "posturing about prayer" these days? Certainly there's much truth in the proposition that our society and schools have become too secular. Certainly there's much truth that the moral standards of our nation have declined. But the question remains: HOW BEST CAN MORAL DECAY AND SECULARISM BE CHANGED? We hear a lot of political posturing about "Prayer in School" as the way to change this secularism and moral decay! I ask each of you: **Do you really believe that a moment of mandated prayer in school will really reverse the moral decay of our society?** Or might it trivialize prayer -- because the prayers will then become so generic, so non-specific, so pluralistic that they will have no meaning for anyone.

Is that what Jesus said about "praying?" *"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites: they love to stand and pray in the synagogues (or in schools or on street corners ... so they might be seen by others."* Obviously, Jesus is not attacking public or corporate prayer, whether in sanctuary or school. But he is attacking a "posturing of prayer" -- any form of prayer which seeks to show itself as religious ... as goody-goody! Jesus' point is that prayer is for the edification of the "pray-er" and "those prayed for" -- **it is not a form of public posturing to impress society about "how religious we are!"** It seems to me that Jesus is saying above all - that prayer is to be very personal and very voluntary. He cautions very strongly about making a public exercise of prayer.

And if Jesus' caution is not enough to convince us of the dangers of "making prayer a public show," then let us Lutherans remember what happened in our mother countries which have legislated religion like some in our own government would like for us today. In Germany, Norway, Sweden, Finland -- the state has taken control of religious places and practices. And what has state control done to the piety of the people of Europe? Less than 2% of the people voluntarily pray, give alms or fast in Europe ... and even less go to church!! **Legislated religion leads to a death of voluntary faith!** And legislated prayer will do the same thing: It will make a good showing of prayer, but it will put a knife straight thru God's heart! It will be prayer, but prayer without conviction, without meaning, and certainly without Jesus Christ!

Just as worship on Ash Wednesday is a voluntary act of religious faith -- so should prayer in school or any other place remain a voluntary act of religious faith. Let's keep politicians out of legislating practices reserved by God for the faithful. Because when we legislate "prayer" or any other expression of piety -- then we are turning a conviction of the heart into something with little more value than "worm food." And prayer, almsgiving and fasting are acts of piety meant to be everlasting, not just "showy postures" that will die when we die!

Tonite - Ash Wednesday - our texts urge us to think about the eternal impact of our lives. "Carpe Diem!" "Now is the acceptable time" to repent - to turn back to God who sees through our showy postures and knows us to be who we really are. And as we turn back to God at the beginning of this Lenten journey (or any other time) - we will find that God's heart is breaking over the moral decay of our world. But He will show us the Way to overcome that secularism and decay: NAMELY, BY RENEWING OUR OBEDIENCE TO HIM RATHER THAN TO MERE HUMAN POSTURES. And we will also see that his heart is eager to be merciful and gracious: THAT HIS DESIRE IS TO FORGIVE THE IMMORALITY OF THE PAST - TO BRING HEALING & WHOLENESS INTO OUR LIVES NOW ... **so that we might do the same for each other.** Because that is not just a popular posture -- that is the very power of God: TO DIE TO SELF, AND TO LIVE FOR CHRIST! That's not "worm food," that's the everlasting bread of life!

"Carpe Diem!" Now is the acceptable time to savor and share what will never die -- THE EVERLASTING POSTURE OF GOD!

AMEN.

ASH WEDNESDAY (February 13, 2002)  
First English Lutheran Church, Toledo  
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim Pastor

## **“PIETY WITHOUT PRETENSION”**

*“Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful.” Joel 2:13 “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” Matthew 6:1*

Ash Wednesday ... the beginning of Lent ... the annual Christian pilgrimage to the cross and ultimately the resurrection. When I was a child – I really looked forward to this annual journey with my family. It was the one night every week our whole family was at church. Today – many people don’t even know what “Lent” means. And even more, they never make the journey! I’m sure there are many reasons. But one of the most tragic is that LENT became a time of spiritual morbidity – a time for sour faces & petty prohibitions. Some call this the “piety of Lent” – it’s the old discipline of “giving something up.” Today “giving up anything” is not very popular. But there was a good motive in “giving something up” – it’s called sacrifice ! It was to remind people at least for six weeks of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

But somehow, Christ’s sacrifice got lost in all the weird practices & piety of Lent. Because too often – Lent created superficial practices of “giving up petty things:” like the elimination of flowers from the altar; or no weddings during Lent; card playing and dancing were forbidden; many people abstained from meat & dairy products; some of my friends were not even allowed to go to the movies during Lent. Isn’t it tragic – a good discipline, like sacrifice, was lost and replaced by a bunch of petty practices of religiosity.

So tonite I want to focus again upon this singular & significant word of Lent: PIETY. That’s not paczki or pancakes, but PIETY – a word that means what we show on the outside is what we believe on the inside. And isn’t that the whole purpose of Lent – to help us better express our piety ... our deepest beliefs, our most profound convictions??

Yes – every single one of us HAS A PIETY. It’s what we show on the outside based upon what we believe deep down. Some people believe that money is everything – so they have a piety of surrounding themselves with money. For many others today – sports is their greatest piety. They will do anything to get tickets for certain games or seeing certain teams. For Olympic athletes, that deep FIRE FROM WITHIN is their piety – their conviction to do their very best regardless of the sacrifice ... even with a broken foot.

Yes, when we believe in something – we show it on the outside ... we show our piety, whether it’s for a man named Jesus or for an Olympic event. That’s good piety! And it should never be discouraged! When we believe in someone, esp. Jesus Christ, we are called to show that conviction thru an external piety:

we give & live & practice sacrificially! But Joel and Matthew were concerned about a FALSE KIND OF PIETY – a piety which just sought TO IMPRESS OTHERS. That’s like the people who do things only to be seen ... just to be noticed ... just to make a show of themselves, but not out of true conviction! That’s fake piety – or piety with pretension ... it’s just pretending to be committed!

And God has no patience and little tolerance for PEOPLE WHO FAKE IT! God calls for a piety “not just for show,” but a piety “deep from the heart” – where what we see is coming from a deep and abiding commitment from our inner beings. That’s a PIETY WITHOUT PRETENSION!

A pastor friend of mine illustrates its meaning from a story of his own life. He grew up in a small town. When ten years old, his mom asked him to go to the florist to get flowers for their dining room table. He did it, but with great reluctance ... because he did not want to carry the flowers back to his house in front of his friends who would call him a sissy. But six years later, he fell wildly in love with a high school sweetheart. This time he went to the florist, bought a bouquet, and proudly carried it past his friends at school. This time he didn’t care who saw him ... because after all, nothing was more important than Valentine flowers for a girlfriend.

What was the difference in these two experiences? When getting flowers for his mother, he was doing it “because it was expected.” It was duty; there was no personal conviction. \*\*But when getting flowers for his girlfriend, there was great personal conviction! These were not only actions from his heart ... these were actions he wanted the whole world to see. This was love – not merely duty!

And this is the PIETY OF LENT – a rending of our hearts -- a conviction of love! Real piety always leads to a conviction of action NOT FOR SHOW, BUT FROM A DEEP, PERSONAL LOVE. \*\* So tonight ... or any other time ... whatever we do for Christ on the outside WE DO because of a deep personal conviction on the inside. If it’s praying ... or receiving ashes ... or taking communion ... or giving to the needy – WE DO THESE NOT FOR SHOW ... BUT BECAUSE OF A BURNING FAITH FROM WITHIN.

That’s the Piety of Lent – a desire to repent, to turn around, to stop pretending to be faithful if our hearts are not in it. Jesus was not pretending when he went to the cross; his heart was fully into it ... his whole life was into it ... only a complete sacrifice would demonstrate the totality of God’s love. God asks for the same piety from you and me: not just a rending of our garments ... not just an outward show to impress others ... but a sacrifice ... a piety from the heart! Lent is always a new beginning of real Christian piety ... the beginning of REAL SACRIFICE FROM THE HEART! AMEN.