A Lenten Challenge

March 10, 2019

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

This is a busy time in our church life.

Ash Wednesday marked the beginning of Lent. We are now on our Lenten journey to the cross. And today in the ELCA we celebrate International Women’s Day. We are a church that believes Jesus is God’s “Yes” to us. Our lives can be a “Yes” to others.

Today, women represent 70 percent of the world’s population living in poverty and are often underserved by a lack of access to education and training.

The ELCA believes the time has come for a strong, strategic emphasis on supporting and empowering international women leaders in the life and development of the church and society.

The common thread joining Lent to our focus on women in leadership is that we are people called to be involved. We are called to be involved in our spiritual disciplines, we are called to be involved with the other and we are not only called but tied to Christ. It is in how we respond to that call that is our challenge.

What do you think of when you think of Lent? Or how do you explain Lent to someone who asks “What is that”? Have you ever had someone say, “What are those ashes on your forehead?” Or have you been out to dinner with friends and it’s time to order dessert and you say, “Oh, I gave that up for Lent.” What does that mean? How can your Lenten disciplines allow you a freedom? It’s all about perspective.

Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. The forty days represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin his ministry.

Lent is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. In the early church, Lent was a time to prepare new converts for baptism. Today, Christians focus on their relationship with God, often choosing to give up something or to volunteer and give of themselves for others.

Sundays in Lent are not counted in the forty days because each Sunday represents a "mini-Easter" and the reverent spirit of Lent is tempered with joyful anticipation of the Resurrection.

On this Ash Wednesday I had the privilege to give ashes to patients, family members and staff at Mease Dunedin Hospital. It was a reminder of the beginning our journey to the cross. People shared with me their thanks and gratitude that they were still able to get ashes even if they were in the hospital. That it means something for them. It is a taking time out of our everyday, to stop and to recognize this is different; this is a time to remember.

There is of course the debate of do I give something up or take something on. My response is do something that is a challenge. Do something that will cause you to stretch and grow and trust and reflect and pray. A spiritual discipline worth doing well will stretch us. However once Easter comes perhaps you will have added something to your spiritual life that connects you closer to God.

**Carl** McColman, who writes about various aspects of the spiritual life, particularly mysticism, contemplative prayer, and monastic wisdom, shared in a recent article on Pathos.com about Celtic Monks who had three Lents a year. We can all use more prayer in our lives, and perhaps everyone has areas in their lives that would benefit from some appropriate extra discipline, and heaven knows we are all almost daily confronted with people in need. What if we decided to devote three 40-day seasons each year to cultivating these virtues? Wouldn’t our lives — and our spirituality — more fully mature as a result? After all, spirituality is like playing a musical instrument or maintaining physical fitness; it requires regular discipline to keep us in peak form. We are asked to start with just one Lent, these 40 days. What are you being called to do for these forty days?

Spirituality is not something we do to earn God’s love; it is always a response to that love, freely given. But if we are going to respond to God’s freely given love, doesn’t it make sense to respond as well as we are able? Perhaps we start right here, right now and be open to where God lead’s us this Lent.

In our Gospel lesson we see the temptation of Jesus in the desert by Satan. Make no mistake these were true temptations. We can confuse our temptations with Jesus time in the desert. That is not how we are to take that scripture. Our Lenten disciplines concerning giving up chocolate or coffee because they “tempt us” are very different for sure. For Luke, the issue is not equivalent to personal temptations around faith, but to Jesus’ unique vocation as Spirit-anointed Son of God. Jesus’ vocation is grounded in his baptism story and described as the Spirit’s anointing work of good news for the poor at Jesus’ home-town sermon (Luke 4:18-21). Luke’s temptation is about how Jesus will fulfill his Spirit-anointed vocation as Son of God. During each temptation Jesus uses scripture to thwart Satan. Jesus stands firm and is not alone, the Holy Spirit is with him. So I encourage you to go back and read again the passage and how Jesus was not deterred. What are the real temptations in your life? The ones that pull you away from your call to be Christ to the world? The ones that ask you to show less than love to your neighbor? How can God help you to overcome those temptations?

The New Testament lesson from Romans reflects our values statement here at Nativity as it echoes that there is no distinction between Jews and Greeks.

We are called to look at this scripture, Jews and Gentiles…… An us versus them for sure. A “those” people…… No matter whose side you are on, one group is excluded. One group is NOT worthy…. And yet if we listen, really listen….. that is not what is happening……..

For many people today, words like believing and faith suggest a cerebral idea – knowingly accepting something as true - whether or not the object of one’s belief is demonstrably true (such as “blind faith”). Here, Paul is suggesting that the good news actually changes people. This is about God’s work in us, not something that we do. For one thing, it brings Gentiles and Jews together into the family of God. To “believe” in that assertion is something other than intellectual assent; rather, it is to be changed into a reality in which the long-time distinctions no longer apply. It does NOT mean that we are not different. Instead of using those differences to separate ourselves, to exclude others, Paul is suggesting that, in Christ, we are able to see those differences in one another as gifts to be shared.

Wherever you see the word believe in the passage, substitute the word “trust” and you may hear Paul’s words sounding a slightly different tune. What might it look like actually to trust that God raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9), and not simply to believe it? Or to trust in God and not only to believe about God?

Let us look at what we have in common, what connects us, not what separates us. The connection is God, it is God, not man, that unites us. Think of how powerful that is and how the scripture changes when we say, “I trust.” Trust is a scary word. Do you trust those promises? God is what connects us.

“The good news of God” (or “the gospel of God”) means that God is the good news because he is righteous, merciful, steadfast and caring. In a chaotic, unjust, uncaring world, Jesus proclaimed this good news of God and disclosed God’s righteousness through faithfulness (Romans 3:21-22). His faithfulness proves that God is righteous. Now God justifies those who share the faithfulness of Jesus. Paul is not ashamed of this gospel of God proclaimed by Jesus because it is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16). He goes on to say: “For in it God’s righteousness is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” (Romans 1:17).

We are connected by God, We are all different, and we become united through God. We do not lose our identity. God does not make us all vanilla, or all Jews or Greek. No, we keep our identity. That is the power of God, we are united with each other to God. It is our duty to honor and respect each other. We are all unique and blessed children of God. That is to be celebrated. Our church needs to celebrate each person, their gifts and their contribution to the body of Christ. It is not about come if you fit in, come if you do it our way. It is about celebrating the uniqueness of the individual and being the body of Christ here and to a hurting world. My friends, the world is hurting……. Perhaps you are hurting. Perhaps you have more questions than answers….. What about my spouse, what about the bills, what about that medical procedure….. what about my friend who died….. Or perhaps you are in a good place, you have made it through the crisis, my child found a job, the car repair bill is not as much as I thought. We are all here in different places and that is what carries us through. To share our joys, to carry each other in their pains and trials. We are connected by God, we are connect through trust, we are connected also in our brokenness. We are broken, we are human and in being human we are broken. In a few minutes we will celebrate communion. The meal that will unite us. Ann Voskamp author and blogger in her book Be The Gift writes: We keep healing as we keep being healers. In being the gift of healing for someone’s brokenness, we receive a gift of healing for our own brokenness. Our call is be compassionate, to be a community, a communion, of broken bread and poured out wine, to live cruciform, formed like a cross. Our call is to take the form of reaching hands, open hears, listening hearts because our God is with us and we’re called into communion with him and with each other. Because our compassionate God is all powerful and we cannot help but be compassionate with each other because this is the way of the most powerful. If you lean in close, you can hear it, the faint heartbeat of a strong hope, of people coming together to give grace to each other, to be the gift to each other, through the brokenness of everything being re membered…..

May this day, this Lenten journey allow you to take risks with your faith, to trust in a God who loves you to reach out and be Christ to the other, the one who so desperately needs a word of hope and love.

And May it be so……. Amen

Michelle Mehan