

Give it up

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015.

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:20

Today we begin, in the words of our liturgy, “Our observance of a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” The word “Lent” refers to the lengthening of the days of spring, a time of new life and new growth. Given the weather we have now, spring seems a long way off. We look forward to the reawakening of the earth as well a reawakening of our spirit. This day marks the beginning of a sincere effort to reach the heart of God by receiving the ashes of last year’s palms to remind us of our mortal nature and that “we are but dust and to dust we shall return.”

You may wonder why forty days or six weeks is necessary for self-examination and reflection. If we are serious about making some changes and beginning anew, we can use this time to assess the quality of our lives and make the necessary changes. Six weeks is not too long to develop a meaningful discipline to help us grow spiritually. This is a time to seek reconciliation with those from whom we have been alienated and estranged and to amend broken relationships.

C.S. Lewis said that forgiveness is a lovely idea- until you have something to forgive.

You may think that you can forgive, but you can’t forget. Some deep emotional hurts leave scars that make it impossible to forget, but forgiveness and reconciliation isn’t possible as long as we keep nursing old wounds. What forgiveness does is to release us from the hurt and heals the memories. If you are uncomfortable with admitting your own faults and shortcomings, but if we really want to live a better life, we have to make the effort to unload the excess spiritual and emotional baggage we have been hauling around.

In listing faults and shortcomings, we have to be very honest about those offenses for which we need to be forgiven. Use these next six weeks to acknowledge the fact that Christ assures you that we are freed from the burden of the guilt. We can’t let go of our guilt until we first acknowledge the sin that caused the guilt. If you find that you have lingering anger that easily gets out of control and it is affecting your relationships, work on managing it. Your relationship with others depends on it. Do what is necessary to unburden yourself of inappropriate anger.

Perhaps there is someone harboring anger against you. Take the initiative to be reconciled with that person. You may be surprised at your mutual sense of relief.

It is true that confession is good for the soul. Sacramental confession is available in the Episcopal Church. You’ll find it in the Prayer Book under “Reconciliation of a Penitent.” The old rule about confession in the Episcopal Church is that all may, some should, but none must. Your confession is made to God in the presence of the priest who assures you of God’s forgiveness. Confession is good for the soul because it rids you of the burdensome baggage of guilt of the sins you have committed and the painful memories and anger over offenses committed against you.

It is important that we not make a show of our piety nor let our Lenten discipline become a source of pride. Whatever spiritual discipline you do this Lent, let it be between you and God because God is the only one who needs to know. Given what Jesus says about not making a show of your piety, it is appropriate to remove the ashes from your forehead when leaving here. You don’t need to let anyone else know that you’ve been to church today. God is the only one who needs to know. Let the inward sign of these ashes remain a mark upon your inner person.

During Lent, there is an emphasis on the discipline of doing something extra, but it is still important to give up something as well. It is easy to give up eating things you don’t like. I am more than happy to give up eating liver and onions because I hate liver and onions, but it is better to give up those things that are not good for you. For instance:

Give up pointing out the faults of others and concentrate on correcting your own.

Give up being critical of others and concentrate on encouraging their strengths.

Give up worrying about things you can't change and work on what you can change.

Give up judging others by their appearance and get to know their inner person.

Give up your anger of being hurt and work toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Give up grumbling about what you don't have and give thanks for what you do have.

If you want to take on something new and good:

Encourage the best in others by demanding the best in yourself.

Be more patient with others and see how they are more patient with you.

Don't put off being reconciled with someone with whom you are estranged. Be aware of others in need and see your own concerns diminish.

For your Lenten discipline to have more meaning and be more effective, set aside time each day for silence and prayer and for meditation and reading. We all need quiet time and those with whom we live and work might appreciate it as well. Pick a time and place to be alone and quiet. Let the stillness wash over you and let it bring you a sense of peace.

Let these ashes be a sign that you are one of God's own and know that you are worthy of God's love. Strive to build a better relationship with at least one person each day. If you can do that, you will have made excellent use of this season of Lent. Best of all, it will become an ongoing part of your life to define who you are.