

Forty days to work on seven sins

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:21

Today marks the beginning of Lent. We have six weeks to prepare for the celebration of the resurrection of Christ at Easter. There are some very practical ways of improving the spiritual quality of our lives. We begin this Lenten season with the mark of ashes from last year's palms to remind us that we are but dust and to dust we shall return. In ancient times, it was the custom to mark their repentance by pouring ashes over their head and wearing sackcloth as a sign of their contrition. Jesus warns against making a display of our piety and therefore it is entirely appropriate to remove the ashes before you leave here tonight. Only God needs to know you've been here and God is the only one who needs to know. Let these ashes be an outward sign that remains inwardly in your heart.

Repentance and turning around is what Lent is all about. Repentance means doing an about face, making amends, and making changes in the way we live. Human nature, being what it is, resists change, no matter what the condition of our lives. This Lenten season is about making the effort to be more disciplined, in making sacrifices; it is about exercising self-denial to accomplish the changes we need to make.

Fasting as a part of our Lenten discipline is not just abstaining from things that are not good for us. It is about having the discipline to refrain from excessive consumption of food and drink. It enhances our physical and spiritual wellbeing. When you fast, once you get beyond the hunger pangs, you gain power over your cravings to concentrate on more spiritual things.

A good place to begin our Lenten discipline is to identify areas on which we need to work. The classic list of the seven deadly sins is as relevant today as ever. They are: sloth, anger, lust, vanity, avarice, gluttony and envy. If you remember them in that order they form the acronym "salvage." Let's take a look at what they mean.

Sloth is being lazy and indolent. It affects our attitude and outlook. Slothfulness wastes away our lives, our time, our resources and our abilities. We may be very busy and industrious doing one thing or another while having little or no regard for the quality of what we are doing. Slothful people don't care about anything and are bored with everything. They take no pride in what they do.

Anger. We all get angry from time to time. Anger must be kept under control and directed in positive ways. Righteous anger is a healthy way to blow off steam. Jesus became angry with the moneychangers and ordered them out of the temple. Abolitionists worked for the elimination of the institution of slavery. We are a more just nation because of those who worked for universal suffrage and the guarantee for all citizens the basic right to decent housing, education, and public accommodations. Anger must be channeled in healthy ways to confront what is wrong and make it right. When buried and repressed, anger is manifested in depression. Out of control anger becomes deadly.

Lust goes beyond a normal physical attraction to inappropriate behavior. When sexual expression is disassociated from the healthy expression of love, a person becomes an object to be used rather than loved. Lust cheapens the expression of love.

Vanity is pride carried to excess. We all need a healthy sense of pride and self-esteem. Vanity is self-centered love that precludes love and respect for others. We were created to love God but when God is pushed aside, vanity fills the void. When healthy self-respect devolves into arrogance and narcissism it drives a wedge into our relationships.

Avarice is the insatiable desire for wealth and power. The excessive desire for self-gain is corrupting. The more we possessions we have, the more they own us. Covetousness and greed puts greater emphasis on things and less on people.

Gluttony is eating and drinking to excess that affects both our body and spirit. When consumption of food and drink becomes an end in itself it makes us slaves to our impulses. Disciplined fasting and self-denial can overcome excessive self-indulgence.

Envy. It is all right to admire what belongs to others, but taken to the extreme, envy resents the good fortune of others. It is rooted in insecurity and jealousy and damages our relationships with those who have what we don't have.

So, there you have it. We have forty days to work on the seven deadly sins of sloth, avarice, lust, vanity, anger, gluttony and envy. It is only by the power of Christ working in us that we are salvaged from the power of those sins that waste the human spirit. It is by God's grace that we are saved from what is wrong, unloving, and false.

Make this Lenten season count by exchanging bad habits for good ones. Eat less and exercise more. Talk less and listen more. Be honest and faithful in your relationships, take time for those who are easy to ignore and give more attention to those closest to you. Be grateful for those you love and who love you. God has brought this far. You can do this.