**ASH WEDNESDAY**

March 1, 2017

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, NY

Psalm 51

Joel 2:12-18

Matthew 6:1-21

L

ent . . . a word that has nothing to do with something previously loaned - it comes from an ancient word that meant "springtime," - that period of the calendar during which the days lengthen. It is a church season that is observed for 40 days, Ash Wednesday until Easter. In the 7th century, the Christian Church set the period to be these 40 days to remind people that Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days before being tempted. If you count the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter, you’ll say, “But the days number 46,” and you will be right. But the Sundays during Lent are not counted for every Sunday is a reminder of the resurrection of Jesus.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As a young boy, my first remembrances of Lent are really from Steubenville, Ohio. Our family were Presbyterians and the Endich family across the street were Jewish. The people who lived on either side of us were Roman Catholic and Italian. Every Ash Wednesday they came to school with a smudge of grey ash on their foreheads and during recess talked about the sacrifice they planned to make. They were giving up something for Lent, a discipline that grew out of the early church’s preparation for membership. We tended to get our ashes in the evening, under the cover of darkness and there usually wasn’t much said about what we would give up or sacrifice, although I volunteered to give up broccoli. When I became a pastor, I thought that we should give up meetings for Lent.

The tradition of self-denial is the reason for the raucous celebrations of Mardi Gras - "Fat Tuesday" in French. When the Tuesday before somber Ash Wednesday arrived, it was the last chance to kick over all boundaries before a month-and-a-half of sacrifice. Lent was traditionally a time of fasting. The Tuesday before it started was a time when people would use up eggs, butter, and other perishables that would not last through the Lenten season, and "Fat Tuesday" was celebrated with many traditional (and tasty!) baked goods. Then would come Ash Wednesday. No more goodies till Easter.

Lent is still a church season in which we prepare for Easter. It is a special time of prayer and reflection, of confession and self-denial. As a newspaper columnist, had it sometime back (who happens to have a good grasp on the subject by virtue of his own Catholicism), Lent is "An Excuse to Be Better."[[2]](#footnote-2) He wrote,

“A steady stream...paraded down the aisle and paused for a priest to smudge the sign of the cross on our foreheads and warn, "Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return."

I usually vowed to dedicate Lent to a few do-able reforms--eat less (Milky Way candy bars or Isaly’s Klondike bars for 40 days!), watch my attitude [no tantrums when agitated], speak and think charitably of others, pray for people I envy or resent rather than criticize them. I was merely showing modest goals I set for myself. Honestly, over the years I only showed modest progress. Still, Lent was an opportunity to concentrate mind and soul. Lent was an excuse to be better...

An excuse to be better. I like that. What will Lent 2017 mean for you? The decision is yours. If I may be so bold, I will offer a few suggestions. In the tradition of "giving up" something for Lent. How about some of these:

• **GIVE UP** grumbling! Instead, "In everything give thanks." Constructive criticism provided lovingly may be OK, but "moaning, groaning, and complaining" are not healthy Christian disciplines.

• **GIVE UP** 10 to 15 minutes in bed! Instead, use that time in prayer.

• **GIVE UP** looking at other people's worst points. Instead, concentrate on their BEST points for a change. We all have faults. It will be easier for people to overlook OUR shortcomings when we overlook THEIRS first.

• **GIVE UP** speaking unkindly. Instead, let your speech be generous and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting. Check that sharp tongue.

• **GIVE UP** your hatred of anyone or anything! Instead, learn the discipline of love. "Love covers a multitude of sins."

• **GIVE UP** your worries and anxieties! Instead, trust God more. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something over which we can do little . . . like tomorrow! Live for today and let God's grace be sufficient.

• **GIVE UP** TV one evening a week! Instead, visit someone who is lonely or sick. There are those who are isolated by illness or age. Give someone a precious gift, your time!

• **GIVE UP** buying anything but essentials for yourself! Instead, give the money to God. The money you would spend on the luxuries could help someone meet their basic needs. We are called to be stewards of God's bounty, not consumers.

• **GIVE UP** staring at your mobile phone during meals. Instead, enjoy the taste of what you are blessed to receive and be nourished by face to face conversation with others. You might also **GIVE UP** your rush to devour edible stuff with a spontaneous haste to nosh. Instead, pause and offer a brief prayer of gratitude before wolfing.

This is not a long list. I am sure you can think of better things to add. Just take Lent 2017 as an excuse to be better.

Lent is a time to dump some of the heavy burdens we carry. I remember a boy at my junior high who had a form of muscular dystrophy. He could get to classes alright, but the stairs in that old building took extra effort. It was a hardship and challenge for him to carry his books when changing classes. So, I offered to carry his along with mine and eventually, others began to help, too. Removing some burdens really frees us to move more easily. But not all burdens are a stack of books. Sometimes our burdens are just the bad feelings we have about ourselves because of the attitudes we have taken which inwardly we know are wrong. We could even describe them as our sins.

Want to get rid of YOUR heavy burdens? Centuries ago, someone said, "Come to me, all you who all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens..."[[3]](#footnote-3) This is the same one who, even as you wear these ashes says, "Come...and I will give you rest." Sometimes there is just no softer pillow at night than a good conscience and as we confess our sins to Almighty God during this Ash Wednesday and Lententide, God’s promise of forgiveness prepares our minds and our hearts to do better.

1. Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bill Reel, "Lent Is an Excuse to Be Better," *NY Daily News*, 2/18/88, p, 37 quoted in Pastor's Professional Research Service, 1/89-2/89-1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 11:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)