
Lenten Disciplines: A Journey Toward The Cross

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Ash Wednesday – Year C

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the 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.

What is the difference between your Lenten discipline and a New Year's Resolution? Before you answer that question, let me go ahead and put my cards on the table and say I struggle with Lenten disciplines and no longer attempt New Year's Resolutions.

For many years I have been trying to get to the heart of this struggle and have concluded that when it comes to Lenten disciplines: 1. I am either weak, or 2. I am an idiot...or 3. I am all of thee above.

When I try giving up something (for example: alcohol), I am always bending the rules and creating these Pharisaic / IRS loopholes. It goes something like this: It is okay to have a glass of wine when visiting family, because you need wine when your family decides to talk about politics!

Then there are the times I decided to give up sweets, but you know how it goes...There is a funeral reception in Child Hall and we just got through burying Betty's Uncle Bob and she wanted me to try her family's chocolate fudge...I want to be a good priest, so I break my discipline and eat the chocolate. After all, it is the pastoral thing to do.

Behind all of this rule bending is something that I like to call human weakness.

And then there are the idiotic disciplines: A few years ago, I decided my Lenten discipline would be to read Karl Barth's commentary on Romans. Karl Barth is not easy to read; some might think reading Barth is like chewing cardboard or drinking from a firehose.

That Lenten discipline turned out to be idiotic because it was too much. I spent most of my day off trying to "speed read" Karl Barth, in order to complete his commentary. In the end, that discipline was more about intellectual accomplishment than it was spiritual nourishment.

So, here we are on Ash Wednesday about to embark upon another Lenten journey and attempt yet another Lenten discipline.

In just a few moments Canon Zappa will extend the invitation to a Holy Lent. She will say, "I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the 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."

What will be your Lenten discipline? How will you keep from failing? How will you keep from turning it into an exercise of self-glorification instead of a spiritual discipline?

As I look back upon my spiritual life, the successful Lenten disciplines have been those that are intentionally focused on the journey of Lent. What do I mean by that?

Today, we are marked with ashes on our foreheads and hear the words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” The ash cross reminds us that we are both created and redeemed by God. This ash cross is an outward symbol of an inward spiritual journey, a journey that takes us to another cross on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

It is important to remember that Lent is a journey. For the business folks out there, Lent has a mission, purpose, and vision, and that is the cross of Christ.

Thus, a successful Lenten discipline is one that will take you from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. They are disciplines that ultimately help you move tonight’s cross from your head to your heart.

So, when Canon Zappa extends the invitation to this holy season, do not make your Lenten discipline a New Year’s Resolution 2.0. Instead, intentionally and prayerfully consider a discipline that will take you into the mystery of the cross and enable you to experience the joy of the resurrection. That is the journey!