

Journey with Jesus by Holly C. W. Aastuen
Luke 4:1-13 February 21, 2010

A college friend of mine put the following post on her Facebook page: “For those of you who follow the discipline of giving something up for Lent—what are you giving up this year?”

The comments started off well enough: first, from a young man in his 20s—“For the last few years I have been in the habit of taking up a discipline, but I haven’t chosen one yet for this year. One of my professors gave himself a refresher in Greek every year for Lent.”

Then a guy I remember from our college days commented: “Typically,” he said, “I give up hard liquor and heavy gambling, since I do neither it’s not too hard to keep my resolution. I’d give up wild women, too, except I refuse to leave the one I’m married to.”

Another college friend with 5 children wrote, “Fixing dinners, doing the laundry and washing dishes. I love these activities so much...it would be good for me to do without for a while.”

It was funny, but I really wanted the conversation to turn serious, so I put my resolution into the conversation and then asked: “Anyone else have a serious Lenten spiritual discipline?”

The next comment came a day later. “What am I giving up for Lent?” she asked. “Snow.”

Since we live in a world where 17 percent of the population is in church on any given Sunday, and less than half of those people probably give up anything for Lent, I shouldn’t be surprised at the conversation, but it made me wonder if the discipline of self-denial or at the very least self-examination has any place in a world like ours.

On Friday Tiger Woods had a press conference to apologize for cheating on his wife and to say he is unsure when he will return to competitive golf.

He said, “I was unfaithful. I had affairs. I cheated. What I did was not acceptable.”

Admitting he felt he “deserved to enjoy the temptations” that came with his fabulous success, Woods said, “I stopped living by the core values that I was taught to believe in. I knew my actions were wrong, but I convinced myself that normal rules didn’t apply. I never thought about who I was hurting. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me. I felt I was entitled. Thanks to money and fame, I didn’t have to go far to find them.”

Saying he wants to live a life of integrity, he talked about the 45 days of therapy he has had during which he’s had a lot of time to think and look at himself in

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ways he never had before. He cited his Buddhist faith as something he wants to return to and regain his balance and be centered so that he can get back to that which he values most—his wife and children.

I applaud him for taking the time for self-examination.

His apology also reminds me that no matter who you are, you are not immune to temptations.

Temptations are never things we seek out intentionally, but are quiet little things that sneak into our lives one piece at a time until we find that we have gotten in deep and we don't know how to get out.

We laugh when Professor Harold Hill in the musical *Music Man* warns that the boy who buckles his knickers below the knees is “on the road to degradation,” but there's a kernel of truth there. There's no harm, directly, in most of life's little misdemeanors, but they grow. An ancient rabbi said, “Sin begins as a spider's web and becomes a ship's rope.” We add the strands that change the spider's web into a rope one strand at a time and each strand seems so small, so insignificant, that we don't realize what we're making.

Maybe what's tempting you is something you feel you deserve because you work so hard. Maybe what's tempting you is something that isn't that big a deal and then you find that you have given yourself far too much to the temptation that it is bringing harm to your life.

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we read the story about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness—temptations about turning stone into bread, about getting the nations of the world to worship him, about asking the angels to catch him as he flings himself off the top of the Temple—temptations to be self-serving, to find the fame and relevance that we all seek.

But one of the greatest temptations I'm noticing today is the temptation to believe we're not tempted, the temptation to think that we're basically good people and therefore we don't need the Lenten discipline of self-examination and denial that can lead to transformation.

Now don't get me wrong—I'm all for positive self-esteem. No one is well served with a burdening sense of guilt or shame. But we seem to have gone overboard the other way in saying that we don't need to examine those things that tempt us, we are blinded to the realities of temptations by saying—yes, we know they are out there, but they aren't enough of a bother to really have to look at them.

And so this passage on Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is our annual reminder to examine our lives, to look head on at the temptations we face and to consider changing our ways before it is too late.

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I invite you to consider not only what is tempting you, but what is getting in the way of you living the life that God has called you to lead.

For some of us that may be chocolate, the common thing to give up during Lent, but for others of us it may be something deeper and longer lasting. The purpose of a Lenten discipline is not just to see if you can do it, but to get at something deeper in your life.

At the Eden Prairie United Methodist Church women's retreat several weeks ago, one of the discussions was about fasting. "When have you fasted?" was the question and there were some interesting answers. One woman talked about fasting from restaurants. Her dislike of cooking was so great that when she examined her life she realized that she and her family were eating out or doing take out four or five times a week. When she examined her life and realized what she was doing to the environment with all those disposable food containers, not to mention what this habit was doing to her family's waist lines, she resolved some time ago to cut back on their visits to restaurants to once or twice a month.

Another woman talked with emotion about her nephew who has diabetes and cannot eat sweets. She decided to cut chocolate out of her life as a show of solidarity with his plight. She had not eaten chocolate for 6 months.

These 'fasts' from restaurants and from chocolate lasted far beyond the season of Lent because they got at a fundamental need they had to live life a little more healthily. They also were sustained by their love of family.

So take some time to examine your life this week. Think about those things that harm rather than help you or the environment or your family—things that you do because you deserve a little reward or because it's not that big a deal. Think about what you want to do about those things that cause harm and consider what you could do to curtail or eliminate the harm it is doing.

Think of it as a 'spring training' of sorts. Every year the baseball players prepare for the season with spring training, getting their strength and skills back to the place where they can perform at a professional level. Through Lent, Christians go through spring training to prepare for the most important events in Jesus' ministry—Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

In our family we've stopped buying pop at the request of my son because of the temptation to over indulge and because of the harmful effects that pop has on our teeth and our digestion.

My personal Lenten discipline which I shared, ironically, on my friend's Facebook page is this: "I'm curtailing my time on Facebook. Not eliminating it, but mindfully using it so it doesn't take over my life!"

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Take some time in thought, in prayer, in consideration of your life this week. What has gotten out of balance? What has taken you away from the things you love to do? What is taking away your life of abundance with God?

The good news is that Lent is an annual reminder that we need to get back into balance. For me the discipline of Lent is like what the rest of the world does with New Year's Resolutions only at a deeper level. The question isn't 'what am I going to resolve to do better this year?' but "what am I going to change about my life—what am I going to add or subtract from it—in order to grow closer to God?"

The even better news of Lent is the reminder that through it all—broken New Year's Resolutions, forgotten Lenten disciplines, neglected exercise programs—God is faithful. God is with us. God is eager to travel with us down this pathway of Lent.

Let us pray: Loving God, we know that you are with us every step of the way and that you are loving us every moment of the day. Please help us this week to remember you in prayer, to pray not only for others but for ourselves and for our life with you. Thank you that you are ever ready to hear our prayers and that you carry us through the trials of life. Amen.