



Living Faith

LUTHERAN CHURCH

God's Vision Our Mission

A Lenten Invitation: Let's Get Over Ourselves and Put Jesus First

Sermon for **February 22, 2012** — Ash Wednesday

Pastor Sandra Cox Shaw

During these 40 days, we're challenged anew to keep our egos in check, recognize our sinfulness and turn away from anything that comes between us & God.

Scriptural Reference: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I try my best to cover up my Southern accent. I have worked for over 30 years trying to get rid of it, and do not want to sound like I grew up in the South. And I usually do pretty well, although I have noticed that when Pastor Scott and I get to talking — and I have known him for several years—both of our accents seem to get just a little stronger.

I guess a Southern accent is just a part of who I am, and I should just accept it and not work so hard to get rid of it.

Now, I grew up in South Carolina. I was the only Lutheran in my high school. In fact, I think I was the only person who was not a variety of Baptist or Wesleyan Methodist. (And there are many different kinds of Baptist, primarily Southern Baptist.) I didn't know then any members of the UCC church or any Presbyterians, although I did later marry a Presbyterian.



I now live in predominantly Jewish neighborhood, and I love my neighbors, and I love where I live. We have wonderful discussions. I can ask of them any question I have about Judaism, and they're happy to answer for me. I answer their questions about Christianity, and I'm able to tell them that all Christians aren't like Pat Robertson, and it's a beautiful thing.

But based on my background, what question do you think I was asked every year around this time when I was in high school — and what question do I still get asked a lot? I'll bet you get this question sometimes, too. The question was and is: "What is Lent?"

I had a hard time answering that when I was 16 — and even now, I don't know if I answer it very well. To my Jewish neighbors, I say: "It's like Yom Kippur," and I pause, "but it lasts 40 days." They look at me rather shocked and groan.

But I believe those of us gathered here tonight have come to try to remember the answer to “What is Lent?” — or maybe, to form an answer for the first time to that question.

Now, being a pastor, of course I went to books to get the answer. From the Lutheran Manual of Liturgy is a rather dry definition: “A time which, by its focus on the mystery of redemption, should strengthen us by bringing us anew to the gift of our baptism” — don’t ask me to explain that right now — and that penitential acts would bring us to “spiritual and moral growth.” A little dry.

Another source told me that the word “Lent” is from an Anglo-Saxon word for “springtime,” and thus, the season should bring me to “the holy springtime of my soul.” That one baffles me. I really don’t know what season my soul is in right now. It kind of depends on the day of the week. And with our warm weather, I don’t even know what season *we’re* in anymore.

In popular culture and in movies such as *Chocolat* — one of my favorites — we hear that Lent is a time of giving something up. People fast during Lent — from chocolate, from beer, or from fast food. I guess that’s an OK idea. But I’ve never really understood how, if I deprive myself of chocolate or French fries, I am a more holy, more spiritual person. Maybe a little thinner, but not more holy.

I also know that some people fast from something and then donate the money they save (because they’re fasting) to a charity. I like that idea. We do a version of that around here during Lent. We gather on Wednesday nights for a simple supper of soup and bread, and we take a collection for the Manna food bank — the idea being, whatever we would have spent for a nice dinner at home or going out, that we contribute and we just have the soup and bread. But our ladies (and some of the men) make such delicious soup that I don’t usually feel deprived.

I could tell you about all the different definitions of Lent that people use — great theologians, common people and everyone in between — but as I’ve thought about this, I think Lent is something for which we have to come up with our own definition. For each of us, it may be a different thing — and no definition might be wrong. We might just all be different, but not wrong.

Based on the reading we just heard from the sixth chapter of Matthew, I would propose that Lent might just be the season when we really focus on getting our own egos out of the way of our relationship with God. That’s my definition.

Now, we are all wired to like praise and to like compliments. I think we’re born with the desire to be well-liked — and unless it turns into some toxic, narcissistic personality disorder, such a desire for praise is probably a good thing, if we think about it. Without it, I wonder if we would work as hard at school, follow social norms of accepted behavior, or even have any

manners at all. We need to care what people think of us. We want people to like us, to be good. We need a certain level of praise — and the feeding of our ego — in order to have any sort of self-esteem.

However, when it comes to our relationship with God, I think the Scripture tells us that our egos can get in the way. That seems to be the message from Jesus right here in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew tells us that when we give alms to the poor, we should do it in secret. It should just be between us and God. Could it be that Jesus is talking about people who love to tell that their donation's keep the church's budget on track? I haven't known many, but I've heard such people exist.



The Sermon on the Mount

Carl Heinrich Bloch

1877

oil on copper

And I have heard of people who will withhold their donations to the church unless they get their own way. I don't know it for a fact, but I have heard that's how we ended up with that pulpit up there.

The point is, our charity to the poor and non-profit organizations really should be about our response to God's love and God's forgiveness. We give because we recognize how much God has given us — and how much we don't deserve it. Our charity, our alms, our response to the needs of the world, to other children of God, who are our brothers and sisters. And we give out of the bounty we have been given by God.

Then we are cautioned about when we pray — and I love how Jesus used the word "hypocrite" so much. That's one of my favorite words, and every teenager I know loves that word. When you pray, don't stand where everybody can see you. Shut the door to your room and talk with God, one on one.

There's no reason to let the world know that you and God are having a conversation. It's almost like people with their cell phones now. They want everybody to know they've got a phone call. Well, our conversations with God shouldn't be like the cell phones in the mall. And how can you really, really have a good conversation with God if we're out where everybody can see us?

Now I'm not saying it's wrong for us to pray in community together. That's a different thing, and that matters, and it's very important. It's interesting that on this Ash Wednesday, when we have this gospel, I heard on CNN this morning that some fellow football players who are Christian are criticizing Tim Tebow for praying on the field. I'm not taking a side on that, but I just think it's real interesting, in light of this reading for today,

that other Christian football players are bringing that up.

Now when you fast — and I love that this isn't *if* you fast, it's *when* you fast, and I know very few people that do that anymore, and I don't do it — don't be telling everyone that you are fasting and go around looking miserable. Closest I can come to a comparison: We've all gone out to lunch with someone on a diet, and she is eating lettuce and making you feel that you're really rotten for having something more than lettuce. Telling everyone would only make you feel special or better than those who are not fasting. Keep it to yourself. God knows, and that's all that's important.

And some of my favorite verses in all of the Bible sum up the whole passage: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also."

Maybe Lent means we try to have our treasure in the right place, and our hearts in the right place. Our search for approval from the world — our thirst to be accepted, our thirst to feel special — can lead to us getting our priorities all out of order.

So I would say that Lent is the season when we recognize our own sinfulness, that we recognize the pull that our egos have on us. We recognize that we like to be admired and well-respected, but we also keep in mind that it can get completely out of control.

Now our own egos — our own self-centeredness, our own self-absorption — are as much a part of most of us as is my Southern accent to me. We can try to cover it up, but it's there. All of us who are human have that need to be in charge and appear special, that need to only think of ourselves, which leads to a multitude of idols. Anything that we worship and love more than we love God is an idol.

So Lent is the season when we try to get over ourselves. Lent is really, therefore, not about us. It is about Jesus. It is about eliminating anything that gets in the way of our intimate communion with God — getting rid of anything that has become an idol for us. We are called to give up our desire to be in charge, and let Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven be our top priority.

That's how I understand Lent. I think the only mistake we can make this season would be to enter into it with no understanding or thought about what the season means — with no hopes, with no dreams, with no prayers for how it might change us and deepen our relationship with Jesus. I think that's the only way we could get it wrong.

So my hope and my prayer is that this Lent may give us a clearer understanding of who we are, how we have been set free ... help us to recognize our own agendas ... and that the next 40 days may deepen our relationship with Jesus, as we begin this journey.

Amen.