

“Change”  
Matthew 4:1-11  
March 1, 2020

I don't remember where I heard this story first, but it has stuck in my mind, and I'm sure that many of you have heard something like it. At Easter time a certain family always had a leg of lamb. Nothing strange about that, given that Easter is identified with the sacrificial Lamb of God who was crucified for all. But this family prepared their meat in a peculiar way. Instead of putting the whole leg into one big pan to roast, they would cut the leg in two and roast it in two separate pans.

One day a little girl in the family asked her mother why she struggled to have a lamb leg chopped in two. Her mother could only reply that it was the way her own mother did it. So the little girl phoned her grandmother and asked her why she cut the leg of lamb in two at Easter. The grandmother couldn't give her an answer, but she did ask her own husband. He had the answer.

It seems that his own mother, many years ago, simply did not have a roasting pan big enough to hold the family leg of lamb at Easter. So she split it in two, put it in the two smaller pans that she did have, and then roasted them in the oven. Even though later generations had gotten bigger ovens and bigger roasting pans, somehow they continued doing things the way the previous generation had done them, without really knowing why.

The church, of course, being made up of mortals, often operates in much the same way. We do all sorts of things because, well, we've always done them that way before. And since Lent has always been portrayed as one of those “sackcloth and ashes” kinds of seasons of the year, many of the attitudes and practices have carried on for centuries. Just this past month as the Music Committee began selecting anthems for March, the pastor solemnly intoned that we are forbidden from singing “Alleluia” during Lent. He is grateful that no one asked him why, because his answer was no better than the woman who hacked a leg of lamb in two at Easter: that's just the way it's done. Period.

But that's only the tip of the iceberg. In previous generations entire church choirs would disband, for no anthem singing, with or without Alleluias, was allowed during this holy and solemn season. Clergy were not allowed to wear any color except black, in keeping with the somber mood. Special emphasis in worship was put on penitence, confession of sin, and feeling sorry almost for no other reason than being alive.

But being Congregationalists, who have been taught that there is no such thing as an un-askable question, I find myself wondering, Why do we do such things? What is there about this season that makes so many of us turn our thoughts and hearts to such activities, or rather, to the abandonment of such activities, as joyful sounds in worship? And having grown up in the Midwestern Bible Belt, my first thought was to turn to the scriptures.

Certainly the Bible doesn't say anything about Lent. The word can't even be found in scripture. But its time period of forty days before Easter (not counting Sundays) is identified with the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness where He was tempted by Satan before beginning His ministry. And so it has become a time for prayer and fasting, especially in times gone by.

That is the "what" of Lent. But that is not the "Why." Why deny ourselves happy music during this period - although two of this morning's hymns are a bit upbeat, and deliberately so. Why emphasize what's wrong with ourselves? Why deny ourselves something that might otherwise be harmless, but is something that we enjoy, during this period of the year? Why only wear black, why only be somber, why only be solemn?

Some people might argue that the Church is like that no matter what time of year it is. Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote in his diary that he went to church one Sunday morning, and found it quite remarkable that it had not depressed him for the rest of the day. That goes along with another comment made by the Scottish writer - that most preachers talk about little more than money during their sermons, unless they're complaining to the people who are in church about the people who aren't.

To be sure, there are a lot of churches that dwell quite a bit on sinfulness, on our inability to do much at all right, our utter worthlessness, and our inhumanity to others. And I guess there's quite a case to be made for that. Just look at the state of the world and try to convince me that there's really nothing wrong on planet Earth. But what would be the point? Why do some preachers hurl fire and brimstone, others persuade with intellectual argument, others give impassioned pleas, and still others resort to high tradition, symbolism, and ritual to get their point across?

Indeed, what IS the point of all this? To carry out programs of the church, whatever they may be? To see if we can take in more money this year than last in the offering plates? To try to boost attendance figures? To enjoy the prestige of being part of something that is growing, or that is bigger than the other church down the road, or that is more of a "success"?

What IS success in terms of the church? Why are we here? What are we trying to do? I think the answer to those questions is the same answer to the question, Why should I give up something for Lent? Why is there a tradition of self-denial at this time of year?

And the answer can be found repeatedly throughout scripture, whether Old Testament or New, whether in the books of the Prophets, or the Evangelists, or the Psalms, or the letters of Paul, or anywhere else. The idea is to get people - you, me, and the person sitting next to you in the pew, and our neighbor, or out of town friends, and even our enemies across the globe, to get all of the family of humankind - to change.

To change our life-styles that speak so much of what we do for ourselves rather than what can and should be done for others; to change a society that is more interested in greed than in compassion; to change a world that is more interested in protecting what little it has rather than to recognize that all have claims - basic claims - that need to be met such as shelter, food, clothing; respect, dignity, personhood; mercy, justice, and love.

Anything we can do to make it clearer to ourselves, and to others, that the world as we know it is NOT good enough, that whatever successes we enjoy can still be improved

upon, that no matter what has gone on before can still be useful in the cause for righteousness and freedom and peace - anything that can be done in the service of a God who bids us to be like His only begotten Son - anything that is consonant with the divine image within us, is to be pursued until we have indeed, in Christ, brought the Kingdom of God into this world.

If your way of bringing about this kind of self-awareness is to give up chocolate for forty days and forty nights, then more power to you. If you have some other way, then fine, well, and good. But may the transformative Spirit of Lent continue not just these forty days, but throughout the year, and throughout our lives, that a positive sense of what it means to be a servant of the living God can be sown in us, take root in us, and grow within us, to the glory of an ever-faithful God.

Let us pray: