

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Luke 10:25-32

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Good Ears

People often ask the pastor what his or her Lenten practice will be. I think they expect to hear something like "Oh I am reading all the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas" or "I am refusing to shop for anything but groceries." These things sound ponderous, and sacrificial. But this year I am going simple. I am simply going to remember to breathe.

I'll get to that later.

Let me say here today, on this first Sunday of Lent, that I did not grow up in a home that spoke of Lenten practices. In the UCC church I grew up in, we may have focused on certain scriptures so as to lead us to Easter, but I have no memories of my congregation or my family for that matter speaking of or engaging in specific Lenten practices. It was other people, the Catholics, who gave up sweets, or eating meat on Fridays, who wore ashes or who attended other mysterious early morning services to mark the season of Lent.

Yet in the time I've been a pastor the Protestant church has eased up a bit, stopped defining itself as 'not Catholic', and started taking more seriously the idea of the liturgical year and specific practices for particular seasons, like Lent.

And what seems to be the case is that there are a myriad of possibilities. A young girl, high school age, plans to give up gossip for Lent. Think about it...it would not be an easy thing to do! Someone else I know this year is giving up Facebook "I can't take the vitriol anymore" she said, though I noted this was not a permanent dis-engagement...she did announce she'd be back on the other side of Easter.

Perhaps you did not come to church today even aware that this Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent. Perhaps you haven't decided to do or forego a particular thing for Lent. I will say, if you are thinking a practice might be helpful, you might consider one of those daily devotional booklets from the UCC we have on offer here today. Taking a few moments each day to read and reflect might simply be what you most need right now.

Lent has traditionally begun with the story of Jesus in the wilderness, so tired, so hungry, so alone -- with the devil there to tempt him. Will he take the quick fix, the offers of security, power, and prestige? It's a great passage to begin a season of reflection. But today we heard the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha. What do these stories want to say to us today?

The Good Samaritan might also be called the story of the lawyer and Jesus because the story part, the Good Samaritan story, was told in the midst of an encounter. The lawyer comes to Jesus wanting to know if he is in. He is trying to prove a right to eternal life -- He's earned it, he thinks. He has done everything right. But he wants to be sure. When Jesus asks him what the scriptures say, and when he has the right answer Jesus doesn't say "Great answer! You are my best pupil!" He just says "You have answered correctly. Do this and live."

This story reminds me of years ago when I took a course led by the Bible scholar Walter Wink. Though Walter Wink is brilliant, one of the more thought provoking theologians I've encountered, I found him a most disconcerting teacher. Why? Because he didn't give you all that much. People would be talking, offering ideas, asking questions, and he treated every comment just the same. He'd listen, He'd nod. He'd teach some more. No one got that "great thought!" or "how interesting that you should point that out..." kind of response from him. I was only in my twenties at the time, and it was perhaps the first time in my life that I realized that much more than I thought, I liked people who affirmed me, who made me feel interesting or smart. And this guy, darn it, he just didn't.

I later learned that this way of responding to questions, to people was purposive. I think it was like Jesus. Jesus didn't come into the world to stroke people's egos. He came to make disciples.

In a similar way, you might see or hear the story of Jesus speaking to Martha as harsh. Mary is lifted up, Martha is put down. But we forget that Martha, for all her effort, is throwing her sister under the bus, complaining to Jesus that she, Mary, isn't helping -- showing to Jesus that though she is busy, she, Martha also has a heart caught in resentment.

These passages, these stories, have something in common. They both disclose or reveal something -- that sometimes, when we are trying to be good, we have within us real barriers to the good, that is to say, barriers to self-awareness or transformation.

The lawyer is too busy trying to justify himself to hear Jesus very well. Martha is too busy doing the hospitality gig to come and sit at Jesus feet. There is something going on, something standing in the way of them having, if you will, good ears. And in each case, Jesus gently, lovingly calls them on it.

I think this may be the second such confession in a month, but this week I have really been struggling. My husband Mike and I took off last weekend for much needed time off. Only as we were making our way up through Vermont to Montreal the phone began to ring. The rehab center where my Dad has been since breaking his hip over a month ago was ready to spring my Dad from the place – the calls were coming in on Friday telling me this was coming to pass on Monday. There were calls from Life Care and calls from Brookdale (the assisted living facility my father would be moving to, though for over a year now he's been living with us.) There were calls from my brothers. One brother was wanting me to appeal the discharge date, which we'd done once already and got another week... while the other felt, as I did, it was time to get Dad moved to this new place, to get on with this transition. Several phone calls later, we'd decided to do just that. I could feel my stomach hurting as I came to realize the day after we would return from Montreal, we were going to be making this huge change, moving Dad into assisted care – something I know many of you have been through with your parents.

We got the work done, the furniture moved, the papers signed. We got Dad from one place to another. Later, while my father took a nap, I sat doing church work in one of his chairs, my feet up on an ottoman. Maybe this will work out after all I thought. Maybe I am finding this harder than he is.

But by weeks end I was feeling it all so intensely still. Jenny Healy invited me to her yoga class. Lying there on a mat, listening to the soft music, doing the gentle movements, focusing for a time on our breath an image came to me – an image of a goldfish in a bowl of cloudy water, gasping at the top, for air. It was an image for me of a family dynamic I find myself in. It's pretty common I think when people are dealing with aging parents. And actually this is something that has preceded my parents decline. When I talk with one brother, we often get talking about the other. And when I talk with this one, we often get talking about that one. And I'm no fool – I know the way this crazy triangle works is when my two siblings are together without me, or talking on the phone with each other, they are talking *about me*. Maybe you've had times like that in your life, in your relationships when the scales have fallen from your eyes. Maybe you can see the image of the goldfish as at times being you.

So here's the thing, and I think it is a Lenten thing. What do you do when your family life, or your friendships have become toxic? It is one thing to name it, another to change it. I have to acknowledge that yes, this is learned behavior, a pattern, and I've participated in it. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I've come to rely on , even relish that wonderful familiar lip smacking satisfaction that comes with pointing out someone else's foibles and interpersonal failures.

That wonderful satisfaction that comes with saying I've done all this...and what, really, have they done?

As is often said, when it comes to relationships, the person we can change is ourselves. So this week, I've needed to say God, I need your help in this. I need your encouragement, so I can be different – I don't want to be that goldfish sucking for air. I want to be a person able to breath, a person living by your encouragement, and grace.

The problem I've often had with Lent is that it often sounds like works righteousness. Wear the ashes and show everyone how pious you are. Give up something and tell people about it, and they will think you are very spiritual -- a spiritual strongman or woman. But that is not at all in the spirit of these two stories today. These stories are not at all about justifying ourselves. They are about being willing to stop, to pause to hear Jesus where Jesus may be gently asking us to change.

Isn't it enough to be a good person? Why do we need to do more than that? I know this is the question many young people, people the age of my children often ask. But the problem is, we can go about doing good and never work on what is going on here, inside. Here, inside, is where fear lurks, where competitiveness wrangles, where our need for affirmation and recognition demands its due, where that need to be doing all the time so I can be in control unbalances us where judgment separates us from our brother or sister. Inside is where all these unruly parts of us reside.

I cannot tell you, all the books on Lent and spirituality cannot tell you, not even Jesus will come and tell you what opportunity there might be in this Lent for you, what exactly is needful for you. But we do know this: Jesus wants in on the inside. He wants all of us, not just the part we might want to put out there for show, the parts we've dressed up nice, the parts we've made work with knowledge and precision. Jesus wants inside, and he wants us to go deeper.

This is the invitation Jesus gave to a lawyer one day. This is the invitation Jesus offers to Martha. This is the invitation of Lent.

May we hear it spoken to each one of us as we come to Jesus's table today.

Amen.