



Sermon

February 17, 2010
A Meditation for Ash Wednesday
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Give It Up

At dinner last night Linda said to me, "You know, some people really take this Lent thing seriously!" She went on to describe a number of staunch Roman Catholic colleagues at the school where she teaches, listing the things they are forsaking the next forty days. Chocolate. Ice cream. Meat on Fridays.

"Linda," they asked, "what are you giving up for Lent?" They assume, Linda, married to a minister MUST be giving something up. Something deep, spiritual and profound. Maybe they're looking to her for advice or insight about what Methodists do differently from Catholics.

You'll have to ask Linda what she's giving up for Lent. I just hope it's not anything that's gonna effect me too much.

"Give it up." Those three words are as much a part of Lenten church tradition as "Let us pray." Or "Repent and believe."

"Give it up." Nowadays, the phrase signals two very different practices, part of two distinctly different occasions. The more recent meaning of "Give it up" calls talk show hosts to mind. Like Oprah. "Ladies and gentleman, GIVE IT UP FOR _____ (insert the name of your favorite celebrity). You always hear the phrase on American Idol, Ryan Seacrest calling the crowd to applaud contestants about to perform. Thank heavens you never hear him say, "Give it up for Simon Cowell" because who wants to give up anything for Mr. Nasty.

"Give it up." More traditionally, these words, like with Linda's colleagues, are a summons to penance, a discipline particularly associated with

Lent. Yet, as different as these two meanings may appear to be – one for praise, the other for penance – I'm thinking each one points to something important for these days of preparation for resurrection.

Coming to church the next six weeks, in Lent, you'll notice the first reading each Sunday, the reading from the Hebrew scriptures, will highlight the covenant relationship God establishes with people – with childless Abraham, stuttering Moses, oppressed Israel, General Joshua, and Isaiah the prophet calling forgetful people back to God's promise. The same Sundays, the epistles and the gospels – Jesus surviving Satan, his imagining God's gathering wayward people like a hen gathering her brood, telling stories about fruitless fig trees, patient farmers, lost coins, sheep and sons – the New Testament readings are snapshots of the Jesus' message of God's love to the world. All these readings for Lent focus on what God does out of love, NOT what we might be persuaded to do out of guilt.

This is certainly reason for applause. So "Give it up."

But the readings, stories and back stories do more than tell us of a saving God come to the rescue while we are passive spectators. All these stories call us to respond to Divine bigheartedness. In and through these stories, the WORD from God is mercy and unconditional love. And our receiving what God is trying to give is supposed to change us. Especially the smudged parts of our lives we use ashes to remember. The parts of our lives we repent or need to.

This is the reason for penance, so, if necessary, "Give it up" like that. Give it up for a life that is a response to God's goodness and mercy following after you all the days of your life. (Psalm 23)

Things like prayer (focused time alone with the holy, taking time to notice the transcendent), fasting (not painfully starving nor mindlessly consuming even fewer meals than normal) and almsgiving (actively caring for someone broken or impoverished rather than throwing a few bucks in a special offering) – prayer, fasting and almsgiving have long been cherished in the great religions of the world. As important as they are, they are not meant to be public displays of personal religious prowess. Like we heard from the prophet Joel, "Rend your HEARTS not your garments" as if to say "If all this give-it-up stuff is for show and not stirring God in your heart somehow, then it's nothing but staged."

Give it up for, like it says in the Ash Wednesday psalm, Give it up for "a clean heart and a right, renewed spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10)

Jesus says the same thing in tonight's gospel: Don't blow your horn, pray to be noticed, or let others know you are fasting/giving it up. It's not about YOU, the outward you anyway. It's about stoking the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit coming to life in and thru you.

While prayer is always relevant, fasting and almsgiving have lost some of their religious significance today. Fasting is more part of weight loss formulas, not religious discipline. Almsgiving means charities and charities mean tax deductions. Nothing is wrong with weighing less or paying the government even less. It's just the motivation isn't getting anybody closer to God.

So the Lenten challenge for us is to discover new ways of appreciating fasting and almsgiving. "Here is the fasting/giving it up I'm after," says Isaiah speaking as God's mouthpiece: "Break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation, free the oppressed, cancel debts."

"Give it up," Isaiah continues, "sharing food with the hungry, inviting the homeless into your home, putting clothes on the shivering, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will

turn on and your lives will turn around.... Then when you pray God will answer, you'll call out and I'll say 'Here I am' " (Isaiah 58:6&ff The Message)

The question, once again, at the beginning of Lent is how might I/we move, what might I/we REMOVE to get in touch God and new life in Christ? What are one or two works of justice, mercy or unconditional love that I'll/we'll faithfully undertake over the next forty days, open to what God stirs in me by my involvement? Are there new or RENEWED ways I can give myself to those I live with and love, or with whom I work, or pray or play? Are their old bitternesses and disappointments I'm long overdue on giving up?

Don't miss this. Lent offers us a graced opportunity to reevaluate and readjust in our relationship with God.

So, let's give it up for that relationship.

■■■ Amen ■■■