

Presiding Bishop's Lent Message

The Church gradually took on the discipline of Lent in solidarity with those preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil. That preparation work has traditionally been summarized as prayer and study, fasting, and almsgiving. Today we might remember the origins of Lent, take in our traditional understandings, and use these 40 days plus Sundays to prepare to renew our own baptismal vows. This ancient understanding of prayer, study, fasting, and almsgiving shapes the lives we lead. Each of us is baptized into a life of relationship with God (prayer), relationship with self on behalf of others (fasting), and relationship with all the rest of creation (almsgiving). Lent brings a regular opportunity to tune up our Christian life and relationships.

What happens when you take your car in for a tune-up? Most of us no longer do that work ourselves, because the computers in our vehicles are usually beyond our reach. They are not, however, beyond the ken of those with appropriate skill, training, and tools. The spiritual life of a Christian can also benefit from the assistance of technicians (trained practitioners) -- priests, spiritual directors, confessors, a Cursillo reunion, or 12-step group. The opportunity to review the functioning of spark plugs, change the oil, test the cylinder compression, and rotate, fill, and maybe even replace the tires keeps our cars running.

The same kind of attention to one's spiritual life can yield better gas mileage (focused energy for effective living) and effective transportation (how do I get from where I start to my destination?). Reviewing the rules of the road can make the trip much more pleasant for us and others (the early followers of Jesus actually called their practice "the road" or "the way"). We human vehicles need an effective connection to the source of life, guidance and directions (prayer and study), regular maintenance (fasting), and effective ways to connect with the world (almsgiving).

This Lent could be an opportunity to learn new ways of praying, or what the apostles teach, or what Jesus says about money. It could also be a time to take on a new prayer discipline -- maybe practicing seeing the image of God in every person on the street, or being grateful for the hidden blessings of the parts of creation that challenge us (gray days, viruses, mosquitoes -- I'm still working on mosquitoes!). We might practice compassion for the coworker who drives us crazy (and perhaps seek help in learning more effective ways to relate).

The ancient tradition of fasting is about self-discipline in what we eat and drink, and in today's world it is also about judicious consumption of the world's goods -- not just what we buy at the mall, but how we use water, how we leave the air around us, how we deal with "garbage," and the size of our carbon footprint. It is a recognition that how we use the blessings of creation has a vast relationship to how our neighbors can also enjoy those blessings.

Giving alms means caring for those in need. The word comes from the same root as *eleison*, as in *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy), and it really means compassion. How do we approach and respond to the people around us and far away who are "crying in the wilderness"? The work of Lent is about cultivating a compassionate heart that will shape all our encounters in the coming year and years. Sunday schools often take on a specific alms aim during Lent, like filling a penny jar for Heifer Project, or serving lunch at a homeless feeding center. Almsgiving has traditionally meant acting compassionately with one's treasure, but it is just as appropriate to think about how we use our time and talent mercifully.

As we approach Lent -- early in February this year -- let me invite you to join in tuning up your spiritual life. Take an hour to make an inventory -- what mechanics know as a squawk list. Which spark isn't as hot as it might be? Which tire is going flat? What kind of oil are you going to add this time? And what are you going to do with the old, dirty stuff? That's what the altar is for, in a spirit of repentance and return, and it's not unlike recycling the old so it can be used for good. A blessed trip this year!

+ Katharine Jefferts Schori