

Giving Up
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February 28, 2010 Lent 2C
Based on Luke 13:31-35

Perhaps you noticed how Lent started early this year, a week earlier than last year. It caught me by surprise. I didn't even have time to figure out what I was going to give up! I noticed that the free pancake meal that IHOP usually serves on Fat Tuesday wasn't served until this past Tuesday. The earliness of Lent must have caught them by surprise as well.

How many of you give up something for Lent? What did you give up? I heard that one pastor gave up his cell phone for Lent. Can you imagine the announcement that pastor made to his congregation? "By the way, if you need to reach me anytime during the Lenten season, good luck..." :-)

One time when I asked one of my parishioners what she was giving up for Lent, she responded, "I think I'm just giving up."

Have you ever felt like that? Like just giving up?

I came across an article this week written by a professor of American history at Emory University. He referred to us as "America the Miserable." He writes, "The optimism once held by many Americans has been 'beaten out' of them amid a lagging economy, threat of terrorism and two ongoing wars. All of these things, collectively, have made people start to be much less confident than they used to be. The reassuring can-do spirit that once defined the United States is becoming harder and harder to come by."

We know all too well what it's like to want to throw in the towel, to just give up. It's the advice the Pharisee's give to Jesus in the gospel. Just give up, Jesus. Herod is after you. He has placed a death wish on you. You'd better get out of town, now! Otherwise, you're a dead man, Jesus.

When Jesus hears this, he surprises the Pharisees by dismissing their warning. "Herod is nothing but a sly fox," Jesus says. Herod talks big, but ultimately he is powerless against God's plan.

Jesus is on a mission to save the whole world and he's not going to let anything deter him from carrying out God's plan. God has already divinely determined the time frame. Jesus says, "I will keep on casting out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and the third day I will accomplish my purpose." Jesus speaks the same words to Herod that he speaks to Pilate before his crucifixion: "You wouldn't have any power over me unless it was given to you from above."

"Go Jesus!" we say. "Show 'em who's boss!"

But then Jesus says something that takes us by surprise. He says, "Even though Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers, I must proceed on my way." Jesus acknowledges that ultimately he will give up. Jesus will *give up* his very life on the cross in order to fulfill God's plan of salvation.

What has Jesus chosen to give up this Lent? His very life. Why? Because of the incredible love he has for us.

Just as Jesus gave up something, Christians, too, have a tradition of giving up something during the Lenten season. I commend every Christian who chooses to give up something because it tells me that they are taking their faith seriously. But I also know that often times we lose sight of the true purpose of giving something up. The intention all along was to give up something so that we would have more time to draw closer to the Lord.

Some people give up meals (what is known as fasting) and donate the money that they would have spent on food to a local food bank. Others give up their favorite sitcom and instead spend that 30 minutes reading the Bible.

I've heard of people giving up their personal free time and going to visit a lonely neighbor, or they go help someone who needs a little assistance with the day-to-day tasks. In today's society, time is one of the most precious commodities. So we honor God, who is the giver of time, by using our time on things that pleases the Lord.

If you want to know what you should truly give up for Lent, ask the Lord in prayer, "What would you have me do?" and then quiet yourself and listen for God to speak. Then, after God answers, intentionally make time to do just that. It's the same method Jesus used. Jesus knew what God was asking of him – to sacrifice his life upon the cross – so he claimed it as his mission and didn't allow anyone or anything to stand in his way – not even that sly 'ole fox Herod.

What if, like Jesus, we would "give up" our own wants and desires and accept God's plan for us? What if we would "give up" the idea that our lives are our own, and instead accept the fact that everything belongs to God – even our very lives?

What if we would "give up" the illusion that if we store up enough riches we wouldn't ever again have to "give up" anything? Do you remember what God told the rich man who built more barns so that he could store all of his riches? "You fool!" God said. "You will die this very night! Then who will get everything you've worked for?"

What if we would choose to "give up" anything and everything that keeps us from deepening our relationship with God?

Give up the past regrets that paralyze us from claiming the future God is offering.

Give up the grudges that we have been harboring far too long.

Give up the need to belittle others in order to make ourselves look better.

Give up the small voice in our head that makes us question whether we did the right thing, or whether we have what it takes.

Give up the doubt that hinders us from trusting the truth of God's promises.

Give up demanding that everyone in the church has to agree in order for us to be the people of God.

To move beyond giving up sweets, soft drinks and TV, and rather give up something truly life-changing, just imagine what impact that would have on our journey with Jesus. We shouldn't be the same people on Easter Sunday that we were on Ash Wednesday. If we truly give up something that hinders us from growing in our relationship with God, then there should be a noticeable change in our faith and in our devotion to God once we reach Easter.

What would happen if this Lent we would give up everything but the cross of Calvary on which Christ died? What would happen if we lived with the realization that even when we don't give up everything that we should, God does not give up on us? "While we were still sinners," the Bible says, "Christ died for us" in order that we might experience God's mercy and salvation.

So Jesus, you'd better just give up! I'm planning to do just that, he responds.

Thanks be to God!