

What Are You Taking on For Lent?

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The traditional question of Lent, at least in the mind of conventional wisdom, is “What are you giving up?” It’s not a bad question. The practice of self-sacrifice is often a useful means of bringing intention to this season of reflection and preparation. At times, of course, the act of personal sacrifice becomes an end in itself, and thus calls no attention to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ; and on occasion the act of sacrifice can dissolve into no sacrifice at all—I think of my Catholic childhood friend who gave up *asparagus* for Lent! However, for many persons an exercise in self-denial can provide a powerful vehicle for exploring the passion of Christ.

“Giving up,” after all, is a gerund of faith, a crucial component of Christian discipleship. Like “leaving” and “following,” “giving up” offers one a step toward an appropriate stewardship of God’s calling. In last year’s stewardship materials Ann Weems offered some creative suggestions as to the variety of things Christian stewardship invites us to “give up”: pettiness, cynicism, our own agendas, self-indulgence, fault-finding.¹ We might suggest substitutes or additions for our own lists and create an outline for a Lenten sermon series on “giving up,” one which would help us look at the need for some significant sacrifices of comfortable assumptions. Such an examination would be faithful to the season, for if anything was crucified with Christ at Golgotha, it was comfortable assumption.

However, I want to suggest here a different approach, different primarily in tenor and emphasis. I want to reverse the question for Lent a bit and ask it this way: “What are you taking on?” What additional agenda and emphasis are you—are we—willing to add to make this season more meaningful and more useful? There are many possibilities; let me suggest four.

I.

The Increase of Christ. We could well start with disciplined prayer, study, or meditation that would foster an increased sensitivity to Christ’s lordship. Several years ago I saw for the first time a photograph of Karl Barth’s study in Basel. The office struck me as surprisingly simple, and Barth’s study desk as rather small. Over the desk hung a painting, the dominant item in his working space—a reproduction of “The Crucifixion” by the sixteenth century German master Matthias Grünewald. The painting is a graphic crucifixion scene set in the contrast of darkness and light. To one side of the cross stand the mournful friends and family of Jesus. To the other side are a lamb and John the Baptist. The agonizing Christ on the cross is clearly the focal point of the canvas, but a secondary focus is the outstretched arm of John the Baptist, pointing with an elongated finger to the cross. Above the Baptist’s extended arm Grünewald has

inscribed words from the Gospel of John: "He must increase; I must decrease."

It was to that painting, and particularly to that inscription, that Barth turned each morning as he began his work in Basel. It served as a daily reminder to the theologian of the task before him: the task not of calling attention to his own scholarship, but of proclaiming the crucified Christ. Barth saw in the painting the Christocentric foundation of all Christian theology. Whether we share Barth's particular perception of how to build on that foundation, we can surely share in his sense of the importance of the "increase" of Christ—particularly in the Lenten season. "He must increase." All Christian life and faith must point to him. It sounds almost too simple to be worth pursuing. It is a "given" of the faith equation. Yet, how often we in the church go about our work without tangible reference to the Christ who calls us, without rooting our efforts at the cross.

"He must increase." Such increase happens, in part at least, as we take the message of the cross into the heart of our understanding and make our way amid the crosses that loom before us in our day. Beyond understanding, we need an openness to risk and possibility. Such a point is made by James Wm. McClendon as he records a conversation between the late Clarence Jordan and his brother, Robert. The exchange took place in the early fifties as Clarence, who had begun the cooperative, interracial work of Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia, came to ask his brother to provide legal assistance for the controversial farm. His brother, who would later be a state senator and a justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, declined.

"Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

"We might lose everything too, Bob."

"It's different for you."

"Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?"

"I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point."

"Could that point by any chance be—the cross?"

"That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

"Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the Church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer, not a disciple."

"Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't *have* a church, would we?"

"The question," Clarence said, "is, 'Do you have a church?'"

In all things, in every circumstance, every day, "he must increase." And what better time to start that increase in our own lives and the life of the church than in Lent.

II.

The Affirmation of the Community of Need. The necessary corollary to Christ's increase is less focus on ourselves: "I must decrease." For many of us, this is the hard part. The problem is that we have come to have a rather skewed understanding of self-denial and have not heard the positive possibilities involved in such a posture. To be sure, there is nothing wrong in talking about self-denial in terms of "giving up" material possessions, for all of us need to learn to live more simply so that others may simply live. But the denial to which Christ beckons us involves, in a more positive, active voice, a profound kind of affirmation.

In Mark's Gospel, after Peter's pivotal confession, Jesus invites anyone who will respond to his message to deny self, to take up cross, and to follow. "Deny" is *aparneomai*. Beyond this appearance in 8:34, the verb appears only once more in Mark; the occasion is Peter's trio of denials in 14:66-72. Rather than deny himself in response to Christ's call, Peter denies Jesus. Rather than affirm Jesus, Peter affirms only his own apprehension and fear. But the call to self-denial is still presented to hearers of the Gospel. Jesus' call is not an urging toward self-abnegation and self-neglect; it is rather a challenge to *affirmation*: affirmation of the Christ, and through Christ's ministry, an affirmation of the whole community of need. In an age of self-affirmation and self-fulfillment and self-actualization, this is not a word easily heard or received. Yet I can think of no other word which more needs to be spoken in this time. Beyond the challenge it provides, the call to self-denial and the affirmation of others presents an opportunity to hear a word of grace: the word that we are freed from excessive self-concern by the promise that someone has already carried such concern for us, all the way to the cross. Loved by God, redeemed by Christ, and supported by the community of faith, we are set free for the gracious possibility of affirming the needs and lives of others, and in so doing, of affirming the Christ.

How such self-denial/other-affirmation works itself out in the preacher's own setting is dependent on the peculiarities of his or her own habitat. One word of caution: it is always easier to cite caricatured needs than real ones, and always less threatening to trade in distant human troubles than in troubles close at hand. But the message of Easter is that Christ is alive and going before us in the communities where we live, that we will encounter him in every face of human need. We will hear that Easter message more clearly if we begin during Lent to take on an affirmation of Christ in the communities of need around us.

III.

A new global perspective. If some folks have difficulty seeing the needs under their noses, still others are in need of a larger, global vision of human need. We have allowed a false dichotomy between community needs and world missions to creep into our budgets and our pulpits, when in fact we need an emphasis on both. Lent provides us the occasion to re-examine our ties to

those sisters and brothers around this world for whom Christ suffered and died. Such a re-examination means that we do not cease talking about international mission when the Witness Season ends. Our preaching needs to be intentional in its use of illustrative material from beyond our own neighborhoods and our own parochial concerns. We need to help our congregations listen to new and strangely-accented voices. The church is alive and serving and growing and being faithful in parts of this world about which most of us know very little; in fact, the heart and center of Christianity is shifting more and more toward Third World countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Central and South America. The witness of Christians in the face of deprivation and persecution around the world can have a bracing and innervating effect on our congregations, but not unless someone shares with our people the story of the church around the world.

New patterns of partnership are developing with indigenous churches. A reverse flow of missionaries is offering exciting opportunities for sharing at home. Changing theological perspectives and assumptions are cropping up to challenge traditional patterns of understanding. At the same time crises and catastrophes are affecting large parts of the world's population, and the church has been trying to respond faithfully, despite the lack of press coverage or government action. Only in late 1984, for example, was the famine in Ethiopia and Chad and other parts of Africa made common knowledge in this country, but church relief agencies had been trying to help with the crisis for nearly three years. With so much happening in the world to challenge us and invite our response, our continued ignorance of and indifference to the global scene is beyond defense.

Several recent resources have been especially helpful in cultivating a renewed appreciation and understanding of the world. One of them is a map: German historian Arno Peters' equal-area, equal-axis global map.³ Peters has called into question the traditional Mercator projection map of 1569, which places the Equator two-thirds of the way down the map, thus distorting the relative land areas in a significant tilt toward the northern hemisphere. The Peters map also appears distorted, but it provides a useful attempt at a more representative and fair allotment of land areas. After seeing the Peters map, one cannot look at the Mercator projection map without thought again. Whether one chooses to use the Peters map, or other projections such as Winkel's "Tripel" map of 1913,⁴ such reassessment of the shape of the world can only aid our understanding of our place within it. Robert McAfee Brown's *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* is another resource to facilitate understanding, even if it startles and provokes and unsettles us in the process. Brown's rereading of Scripture through Latin American perspectives forces us to deal with familiar texts in unfamiliar terms, but the sojourn is most instructive and well worthwhile. Yet another resource for understanding Christianity's struggle in the world is Desmond Tutu's *Crying in the Wilderness*, in which the Nobel laureate probes the particular quest for justice and dignity in his native South Africa. Each of these resources, to which others might well be added, can aid us in our search for a new global perspective, a perspective which can serve us well in Lent and beyond.

IV.

An emphasis on stewardship. The autumn-Thanksgiving-harvest times provide the occasions for most of our preaching on stewardship each year, and it is then that we pack in our stewardship drives and every-member canvasses. Still, it seems to me that Lent is also a most appropriate time for considering the nature of authentic Christian caretaking and stewardship. Indeed, sometimes removing stewardship sermons from the expected trappings of stewardship suppers and canvasses and budget requests can enable a congregation truly to hear the message of Biblical stewardship, to sense what it genuinely means to say “the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it” (Ps. 24:1).

In 1983 I was privileged to join some other pastors in a study tour that journeyed from west to east across the continent of Africa. Some of that time was spent in the Volta Region of Ghana, where the damming of the Volta River to provide hydroelectric power for an American aluminum manufacturer had sent tens of thousands of villagers out of their natural communities into government-established resettlement villages. There the Ghanaians were trying to learn new crafts and new skills to enable them to eke out some meager survival in the midst of long-term drought and a collapsing national economy. Some of us from Georgia had participated in a presbytery project to send farm and fishing supplies and sewing machines to these villagers to help them start a new way of life. Some of the supplies had helped; others had not helped very much at all (there was no cloth for the sewing machines, and thread cost the equivalent of twenty-five dollars per spool). Yet everywhere we went we were treated as honored benefactors and guests. Songs were sung in our honor; prayers were spoken in gratitude for our coming; goats were slaughtered and prepared for us, or given to us as presents. Everywhere we were given substantial gifts in appreciation for our meager efforts at assistance, efforts that had cost us so little. I was overwhelmed by the relative extravagance of their gifts, for though the gifts represented nothing we needed or particularly wanted, they were truly gifts of the heart which represented significant sacrifice on the part of the villagers who gave them. I asked a village pastor what had prompted such generosity and sharing on the part of these people who had so little to name as their own, and he said, “Well, it is the story of the widow’s mite. I’ve often found that those who have the least to share are the ones most willing to share it.” His words were later echoed by a gracious Ghanaian woman on the occasion of another gift-giving; she acknowledged the sacrifice involved in her gift, but she added, “If we cannot learn to give from the little we have now, how will we ever learn to give when, by the grace of God, we have more.” How indeed!

For those of us who “have more,” Lent provides an occasion for us to examine what we have and what we share—to examine our stewardship—in the shadow of the cross. It affords us the opportunity to reflect on the costliness of the gifts we have received and on the cost of our own giving. Accompanied by such reflection, the additional burden of whatever we “take on” for Lent may not seem like such a burden after all. What are you taking on for Lent?

NOTES

¹ Ann Weems, *Abound in Hope* (New York: Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1984), 61.

² James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 127-128.

³ The Arno Peters World Map in Equal Area Presentation is available through several agencies, including Church World Service, 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10115.

⁴ Winkel's "Tripel" map is used in a number of sources, including a particularly useful recent tool, Michael Kidron and Ronald Segal, ed., *The State of the World Atlas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), esp. Map 1.