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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18
“Lenten Commitments”

Last week, on Ash Wednesday, I attended a three-hour memorial service for San Francisco Theological Seminary Professor James Noel, at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. Dr Noel was the H. Eugene Farlough, Jr., Chair of African American Christianity and Professor of American Religion.

You can imagine the power of the service. I was amazed with how many people James touched, especially African American pastors. About 15 people gave tributes of at least 10 minutes each. The 11 person New Liberation Church Choir filled every inch of the massive sanctuary with spirited song. Tributes were read from dignitaries, including Congresswoman Barbara Lee of Oakland.

James’s daughter, Kaiya, lightened the service with lyrical and laconic humor. She said her dad mentioned one Ash Wednesday that he was giving up cussing people for Lent. That same evening they went to a restaurant for dinner and a perfect cussing moment emerged. A person cut them off in the restaurant parking lot and took their parking after a brief standoff.

Kaiya looked at James and thought, here goes, the first test. “Dad remained quiet, backed away, found another parking space and even helped the person who having having trouble with the parking meter. ‘Dad, you get points for that.’ He smiled and we entered the restaurant.”

We are still at the beginning of Lent. Some people began their Lenten commitments on Ash Wednesday. This sermon encourages us to make a commitment for the remainder of Lent.

Lent goes from Ash Wednesday to the Saturday before Easter Sunday, a period of 46 days. Many people like to make a commitment during this time to travel with Jesus as he set his face towards Jerusalem where he would die at the hands of those who opposed him.

His love and prophetic calls for justice and his challenges of the status quo lasted for a mere three years. It was too powerful for the authorities of the day. To the authorities, the only solution was the final solution. He died on the electric chair of the day, the cross, but that was not the end for him and us. In mysterious fashion, he rose again on the third day and thus became an energizing force for all that says that death is not the

final word. No matter the darkness, no matter the death, we will and can see light again and we will and can rise again.

Lent is the time to reflect on all this and we make a Lenten commitment to focus ourselves on the journey.

I normally give this sermon on Ash Wednesday. However, since we encouraged members to attend Ash Wednesday services in neighboring Presbyterian churches this year, I decided to offer the opportunity for us to consider making a Lenten commitment or two from today, the first Sunday in Lent.

The intention of these commitments is to have something concrete for us to focus on as we journey with Jesus to the cross and resurrection. It is a reflective time. Even a time of repentance.

Matthew's gospel offers three dimensions for commitment: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Through these weeks of Lent, you may dedicate yourself to a prayer practice, for instance, 10 minutes of silence every morning. Alternatively, you may pray for 5 minutes, meditate for five and contemplate for five each morning. That might sound easy and for some it is and for others not. If a prayer practice is not your cup of tea then it is a challenge and perhaps the very thing for you. Give it a go during Lent, practice the discipline, and see what happens. If you want to know the difference between prayer, meditation and contemplation (the best I can come up with) go to our website where it is clearly explained in the spirituality link.

Remember, when you practice your discipline, think of the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf on the cross. Our disciplines, or sacrifice in our way, cannot compare to what Jesus did but it at least focusses on his journey and sacrifice and may stretch us to greater faithfulness and practice.

The other practices are fasting and almsgiving. Biblical fasting, unlike fasting for medical or health reasons, must be done with an attitude of seriousness and sincerity. When we fast, we willingly deprive the body of nourishment and the pleasurable taste of food. It can be giving up coffee or a more serious fast. The body requires food for sustenance; therefore, our hearts and minds must be totally focused and directed towards God so that God may be the full source of our strength during our period of fasting.

Fasting is done in an attitude of humility. It is not necessary for others to know we are fasting; it is directed towards God. "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to God, who is unseen; and God, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew

6:17-18).

In addition to our attitudes towards God and our stance before humanity, our motives must also be correct. We fast in order to further the building of God's realm by seeking to minister to others. The prophet Isaiah received from the Lord the acceptable motives for our fasts: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter -- when you see the naked, to clothe him (or her), and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Fasts may last for varying lengths of time -- one day, three days, seven days, and more. We should prayerfully seek God (and medical counsel) about the length of our fast. Fasting must have an object in mind; we must have a clear idea of the need and purpose. In the Lenten context, it is thinking about Jesus' final days, death and resurrection.

Almsgiving is similar to the Isaiah aspect of fasting. It is an act of kindness, compassion and service in order to build God's realm. We may decide to write a letter to the editor to advance some cause of compassion, or write to our Congresspersons once a week for bills that meet some pressing issue of wellbeing for humanity -- hunger, refugee placement, poverty alleviation, etc. You may visit an ill neighbor once a week or various neighbors. The possibilities are endless. Again, keep your eyes on the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Finally, an interesting dimension of this Lenten commitment: It is meant for 40 days but the number of days from Ash Wednesday to Easter through Good Friday is 46. Because of this numerical coincidence in the six weeks of Lent, commentators suggest a Sabbath break once a week from your Lenten commitment. The Sabbath may be a day of your choosing. Thus, if your practice is a daily morning meditation you may refrain from the practice on one day a week. If it is giving up carbs, you may have potato salad one day a week. Generally, though, we never take a break from commitments of faithfulness.

One year, Suellen and I gave up sugar for Lent only to discover that almost every food item contains sugar. That was a wake-up call and we stuck to it. Remember, whatever you do, and do not make it impossible for yourself, make the sacrifice or prayer or act of compassion, a focus on the amazing life of Jesus and what he accomplished for us and continues to accomplish for us. Amen.