

*I invite you in the name of the Church, to the observance of a Holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.*

With these words God invites us to the observance of Lent—a 40 day “re-creation” of the wilderness sojourn of Jesus—long days and longer nights in which Jesus forges an ever deepening relationship with his Father. His trials and temptations are a preparatory time for his ministry in which as miracle-maker, healer, teacher, Jesus faithfully lives into the fullest revelation of the love of God—God’s flesh and blood who will die an ignoble death upon the cross, and then be raised in glory on the third day.

During his wilderness sojourn Jesus fasts 40 days and nights, tempted by Satan. Many of us wanting to enter into the fullest purposes of Lent will attempt some practice or discipline similar to Jesus’. We want to do right things this Lent—what in “corporate speak” are called “best practices”. Some of us will attempt to forsake old habits—giving up favorite, comforting “things”. Others of us will attempt to re-dedicate ourselves to real expressions of sacrifice—we will take on new disciplines to focus or abstain from, or attempt to abstain from food, drink and other niceties.

One of the frequently-leveled criticisms of the church is our embarrassing inconsistencies—we advocate various practices calling for Christians to tithe, sacrifice and serve others in the name of Christ then so many of us ignore those very things, doing whatever we feel like doing whenever it strikes our whim and fancy. One of the great inconsistencies of the church is scripture’s admonishment not to mark our foreheads with an outward sign of fasting and prayer, which is exactly what we do on Ash Wednesday. We are full of foibles, failures and fictions and, we remain the church.

For those looking for inconsistencies, this is your day! All of us have been caught out, all of us are guilty—which may, in the end, not be a bad thing. At least we all begin in the same place—inconsistent, besmirched, not credible. We’re all in the same leaky boat with no oars, something like those coracles in which the Irish monks of long ago pushed out to sea with no sail, no oars, no way of knowing if the winds and the Spirit of God would ever bring them to solid land or that they would perish in the wide and turbulent sea.

This suggests something about the Church, and even more about us human beings. We are inconsistent and shot-through with contradictions. And yet, God has chosen to reveal Godself in the world as a human being. The Book of Genesis tells us that human beings fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Which suggests.....?

That salvation and Grace is not something **we** create but something that comes to use purely through the love, mercy and generosity of God who loves us in spite of ourselves. Scripture tells us that at the end of his 40-day trial Jesus was “famished”. As Lent comes to an end this year what will we be hungry for? Will we seek praise and a pat on the back? Will we look forward to feeling pounds lighter? Will we still be as hungry for God at the end of our experience as we are at the outset, yearning for a deeper relationship with the Source of all things or will we find ourselves satiated by our discipline and practice, self-satisfied with our good efforts this Lent, happy with what “we have been able to accomplish”?

By no means do I mean to diminish any good intentions, nor deter any from some of those things we believe we “ought” to do. Rather, I challenge us on this Ash Wednesday to think again why we undertake a “practice” this Lent, why we believe we ought to attempt these disciplines—these sacrifices. Let me ask a simple question: is the idea of sacrifice something we came up with on our own, or did Jesus in our prayer time, commend this idea to us? Is it Jesus asking us to give up chocolate, alcohol, or some sweet? Or is this a grand idea of our own creating? How do we know the difference?

Once, when speaking to the scribes and the Pharisees Jesus said to them: *woe to you, you hypocrites; for you tithe mint, dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.* Are we denying ourselves sweets, chocolate, and alcohol when we better take seriously deeds of kindness, mercy, and justice?

Robert Farrar Capon, Episcopal priest, professor of theology and Greek, has authored more than 20 books and is best known as a remarkable cook. He wrote an appealing prayer appropriate for Ash Wednesday, a prayer offering guidance as we enter the 40 days of the Holy Season of Lent.

*O Lord, refresh our sensibilities. Give us this day our daily taste. Restore to us soups that spoons will not sink in, and sauces which are never the same twice. Raise up among us stems with more gravy than we have bread to blot it with...take away our fear of fat, and make us glad of the oil which ran upon Aaron's beard....Above all, give us grace to live as true folk—to fast till we come to a refreshed sense of what we have and then to dine gratefully on all that comes to hand. ...*

The portion so intriguing this Ash Wednesday is the phrase: *give us grace to live as true folk—to fast till we come to a refreshed sense of what we have and then to dine gratefully on all that comes to hand.* Notice that Father Capon prepares us for fasting by reminding us first of the availability of thick and robust soups, the variety of sauces, of oil that flows down and all around—which is a way of acknowledging abundance (symbolized in so many cultures by fatness) of well-being and plenty. He invites us to a fast making us aware of and renewing in us the true meaning of thanksgiving—to live gratefully with all that comes in our lives.

Some of us will join Christians around the world a classic disciplines of Lent—fasting. We will refrain from chocolate, others from alcohol, others from soda, others from sugar and many others from foods we believe it would be good deny ourselves until Easter. It will be a challenge. Some of us will “succeed” in the sense that we will last the 40 or 47 days (including Sundays). But I wonder...will we count it a “success” if, not eating or drinking those things from which we will abstain, we constantly think about those foods and drink, obsessing our “sacrifice”.

T.S. Eliot wrote a poem entitled, *Ash Wednesday*. A phrase is often repeated throughout the poem: *Teach us to care and not to care...*Meaning—to “care” for right things, not for our sakes, but for the sake of God. If we are *striving to strive* this Lent, for whom or what are we working so hard? For God’s sake? Or for the sake of our pride in being so very, very good?

Some may remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. It is a story of Jesus tells enabling us to find perspective on practicing our piety. In the parable Jesus tells of two men who come to the Temple to pray. The first, a Pharisee recites this prayer: *God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.* The tax collector on the other hand, humble and penitent, cannot even bring himself turn toward God but beats his breast offering this simple prayer: *God, be merciful to me a sinner!*

There is an important footnote on the Pharisee who fasts twice a week. In ancient Israel Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. Can you guess why? Because Mondays and Thursdays were market days in the cities and villages when there would be a much bigger audience to see and admire the “piety” of the Pharisees.

Lord, show us how to cease striving to strive... and teach us how to care and not to care; all for your sake.