

Rev. Dr. Jim Gill

March 6, 2019

“Give Up”  
Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

A Catholic priest working in an inner city was walking down an alley one evening on his way home when a young man came down the alley behind him and poked a knife against his back. "Give me your money," the young man said.

The priest opened his jacket and reached into an inner pocket to remove his wallet. When he turned around to give it to the young man he saw the priest's clerical collar. "Oh, I'm sorry, Father," said the young man, "I didn't see your collar. I don't want YOUR money."

Trembling from the scare, the priest removed a cigar from his shirt pocket and offered it to the young man. "Here," he said. "Cigar?"

"Oh, no, I can't do that," the young man replied, "I gave them up for Lent." (That priest was saved from being robbed by what I call his "collar I.D.")

On my twitter feed today I read a post from Shane Claiborne. He wrote that his priest asked, "What's the difference between a flute and a stick in the mud?" "The stick in the mud is full of itself. The flute has been emptied of itself so it can make music." That's a good image for Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday.

In a world filled with clutter, noise, and hustle, Lent is a good excuse to step back and rethink how we think and live. In a world of instant gratification, it's a chance to practice delayed gratification – to fast – so that we can truly appreciate the blessings we have. In a world where virtual friends are replacing real ones, it is an invitation to turn off TV and computer screens so we can spend time with real people again. It's an opportunity to give up something that is sucking the life out of us so that we can be filled with God, with life, with love again." 1

Self-denial is the reason for the raucous celebrations of Mardi Gras which is French for "Fat Tuesday." Since Lent was traditionally a time of fasting, the day before Ash Wednesday was always one during which people would use up eggs, butter, and other perishables that would not last through the Lenten season.

Tonight is the first day of the penitential season of Lent which lasts forty days between Ash Wednesday till Easter. HOWEVER, if you go to your calendar and actually count the number of days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, you total 46! Why the discrepancy? The Sundays during Lent are not counted. Here's to Sundi Gras Fat Sundays!

Human beings are naturally self-centered. In fact so are other animals. No one gives a hot dog to one dog among 3 and expects him to share. This trait manifests itself early in life. Infants and toddlers expect, even demand, to be the center of attention.

When the world seems more complex and threatening we turn our focus inward. Fear causes us to focus on ourselves. Self-centeredness also stems from a lack of love. First John 4:18 reminds us, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

In our gospel lesson for tonight, Jesus points out a tendency that is more prevalent than ever in our society, the tendency to judge every act by the question, "What's in it for me? More and more people are judging laws, social policies, careers, and the like by this one question. Whatever the reason, no one can argue that much of our society chooses to "look out for number one." This attitude eventually spills over into our worship of God. We want some return on our investment here! If we are going to pray, we want others to praise our eloquent speech. If we give money, we want a mention in the newspaper or a nice plaque. If we fast, we want folks to point to us as a good example.

But Jesus says, "Don't look for go tooting your own horn when you give to help others." Don't make a show of your prayer life by trying to outdo each other with heaps of words and flowery phrases, and when you fast don't put on the "poor poor pitiful me" look and call attention to yourself. When it comes to treasures on earth, don't keep on renting storage spaces to hold everything you ever gotten. Jesus wants us to be authentic in our commitment to him.

Lent is about dropping the pretense. It's about living the Christian life to the best of our ability and not worrying about what the rest of the world thinks. Jesus doesn't want us to make a show of our faith or our humility. The kind of fast and the kind of prayer that the Lord desires is not be one of making an outward show.

Jesus had a word for people like that—"hypocrite." The word hypocrisy means, simply, "putting on a mask." I find it interesting that some Mardi Gras participants wear special Mardi Gras ... Masks.

One scholar suggests that Jesus himself coined the word, borrowing it from the Greek word for actors, or hypocrites. Back then, a hypocrite was a person who put on a mask to play someone he was not. Today, if we were being true to the meaning of the word we would give Oscars for Best Supporting Hypocrite in a Drama.

If that's the case, why do we put ashes on our foreheads one day a year? Isn't that an outward "show?" The answer is that while we gather to remember who we are, more importantly we also gather to remember who God is - and what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ. We will wash off the ashes tomorrow. We won't wear them every day and blow trumpets every time the offering plate comes by or broadcast our prayers through a bullhorn.

Jesus is warning us that it is possible to do all the right things for all the wrong reasons. He is warning us that if we strive for praise in this life, we will lose an infinitely greater reward in Heaven. He is challenging us to get real about our faith. Do we worship and pray and fast and give to get recognition from others or do we do it because of an overflowing gratitude that says, "Lord, I can't say "Thank You enough"?

The ashes we put on tonight are a symbol of our repentance and of our focusing on our spiritual walk over these next 40 days of Lent.

Many people, when they think about Lent they think about giving up something. Sometimes it takes the form of giving up a favorite food or drink. There's a word for that. It's fasting. When we eat a meal in the morning after a night of rest we call that breakfast...because we are breaking our fast from eating ...the 7 or 8 hours we were asleep.

Fasting has always been a part of religious devotion, both Christian and non-Christian. Jesus took for granted that people would fast. Jesus twice says, "When you fast," not "if you fast," or "you should fast."

Jesus fasted. Paul fasted, The Disciples fasted. Luther fasted. The Wesley brothers fasted. If fasting has been a universal practice of religious people, there must have been a reason for it and there must have been some value to it.

The world says that fasting is foolish. Fasting means you must be hard on yourself. You must deny yourself some comfort or pleasure. The world says we should be easy on ourselves. You owe it to yourself to treat yourself- indulge yourself, stuff yourself to overflowing. Forget the showdown at the O.K. Corral the world shows up at the GOLDEN CORRAL

Fasting is the exact opposite of that philosophy. Fasting calls for pulling in the reins on yourself. It means saying "No" to yourself. It demands discipline and denial. If you are serious about fasting, why don't you give up things that you feel you cannot possibly give up? If you cannot stop smoking, why not try it as a Lenten discipline? If it is alcohol, let the bottle alone for forty days.

What will Lent 2019 mean for you? The decision is yours. You may choose to give up cokes or candy or coffee or cakes or ... cigars. ☺ If I may be so bold though, I'd like to offer a few suggestions that cost no money and don't involve food OR drink.

1. GIVE UP grumbling! Instead, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus, concerning you." Moaning, groaning, and complaining are not Christian disciplines.
2. GIVE UP 10 to 15 minutes in bed! Instead, use that time in prayer.
3. GIVE UP looking at other people's worst points. Instead, concentrate on their BEST points for a change. We all have faults. It will be easier for people overlook OUR shortcomings when we overlook THEIRS.
4. GIVE UP speaking unkindly. Instead, let your speech be generous and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting.

5. GIVE UP your hatred of anyone or anything! Instead, learn the discipline of love. "Love covers a multitude of sins."
6. GIVE UP your worries and anxieties! Instead, trust God with them. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something we can do nothing about...like tomorrow! Live for today and let God's grace be sufficient.
7. GIVE UP screen time! Instead, visit someone who is lonely or sick. There are those who are isolated by illness or age. Give someone a precious gift, your time!
8. GIVE UP buying anything but essentials for yourself! Instead, give the money to God. The money you would spend on the luxuries could help someone meet their basic needs. We are called to be stewards of God's bounty, not just consumers.<sup>2</sup>

At the Rotary lunch today I sat across from a young lady who had gotten her ashes this morning at 7:15 a.m. at First Methodist in Dickenson. They had a drive up imposition of ashes. She said that this year she was going to spend 40 days writing Thank You notes to people she appreciates. She's giving up her time she could spend otherwise by giving thanks.

Over these next 40 days (and six Sundi Gras) I hope you will find something that you will GIVE UP. I hope you will find something that you will give up that will help you LIVE UP to your calling and bring you closer to the One who has called your name. I hope you will Look up and Rise up and Raise up your hopes, your joys, your dreams, your vision of who God is calling you to be, and who God is calling us to BECOME as his people, as his church, as his ambassadors in our community. I hope you will join me this Lenten season as I search for what God wants me to ... Give Up.

1. Shane Claiborne "Fat Tuesday and Skinny Wednesday" Twitter
2. List credited to the Rev. Craig Gates, St. Philip's, Jackson, MS