

## **“A LENTEN DISCIPLINE”**

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Luke 4:1-13

If you were brought up in a Christian household and if your experience is anything like mine, Lent was a time for "giving something up." Even today, we talk of forgoing chocolate, soda, alcohol, or TV. (And for those of us who followed the letter of the law, we gave these things up for 40 days, which did not include the Sundays within Lent. "Every Sunday is a little Easter" ... in which we emulate the real Easter Sunday by ingesting sufficient chocolate to hold us for another week!)

Then the time came when it became more fashionable to "take something on" rather than "giving something up" ... maybe adopting a daily prayer time, or giving weekly volunteer hours, or seeking to improve a relationship with a conscious daily gesture of affection.

Yet either one of these practices reflects the level of luxury in which many of us live, in contrast to the hardscrabble day-to-day existence of the many others around the globe. Much of the world lives in a perpetual wilderness, existing much as Jesus did for 40 days, lacking food and creature comforts. Even within the United States, there are those who live in poverty – the urban homeless, or our brothers and sisters who live in rural Appalachia. This past week, a colleague told of driving thru an area of dilapidated homes in Appalachia, and most of them sported a TV antenna. I wonder how those folk feel when both the ads and the programming on television offer them a view into a world they can never have.

Moving to a global perspective, since we are now connected worldwide by technology, media that originates in the US reflects a lifestyle far outside the day-to-day reality of citizens in developing nations. The typical upper-middle-class family on TV is to our poor as the US is to the rest of the world.

And as I began to think in terms of what sacrificial disciplines might be appropriate to us, under these circumstances, Ash Wednesday came along. And Ash Wednesday highlights the pointlessness of accumulating material things, for both we and our possessions will all ultimately return to the dust.

My thoughts then wandered to plastics - plastic grocery bags, plastic water bottles, plastic silverware - those things that go to dust very slowly. Over the past month, as part of my move, and in the interest of efficiency and saving time, I think I've purchased and thrown out more plastic and paper than I would ordinarily use in 6 months – paper plates, plastic silverware, plastic cups, plastic drop cloths, plastic to enshroud mattresses, plastic bins, shower curtains, cardboard boxes and packing paper, styrofoam worms, travel size cosmetics – even new plastic appliances like my humidifier, and rugs made of synthetics whose odors fill the room, and enough plastic shopping bags to stock a church bazaar!

And then I remembered this photo and this quote: “Somewhere in the northern Pacific floats a non-biodegradable blob of petrochemicals that's twice the size of Texas. Much of this deadly mess originated when someone innocently took home their shopping in a plastic bag.”<sup>i</sup>

Now you and I are not likely to be in the northern Pacific, but the beings who are there are birds and sea creatures. It is heartbreaking to see photos of seabirds who have died of malnutrition because their stomachs were filled with brightly colored plastic goodies they picked from such floating garbage dumps.

“In the U.S. alone, we throw away 100 billion plastic bags each year -- the equivalent of 12 million barrels of oil.”<sup>ii</sup> So that, of course led my stream-of-consciousness to our society's dependence upon fossil fuels and the related topics of international politics and climate change. (No, not global warming, especially in light of the

piles of snow out there, but climate change . . . )

You can see where this is going. I can very easily work myself into a huge guilt trip, the result of which is depression or denial ... but rarely action.

But today, I'm going to ask you to consider a different kind of Lenten discipline, an action instead of denial, a Lenten “do without” that doesn't involve the usual chocolate or alcohol or potato chips. So here goes —

Whether or not you believe that climate change – or global warming – is the result of human behavior, i.e. anthropogenic, or simply a result of long-range natural cycles, we still have a responsibility as part of our Christian stewardship of creation. We know that we are exhausting oil reserves, that this has both lifestyle and political consequences. We know that we are moving animals to extinction, even if that is only a concern to zoologists and tree-huggers.

But what we don't think about is our responsibility to our brothers and sisters who share this planet with us. As Christians, we often delegate that responsibility to our missionaries. One such mission couple are Bob and Julie Dunsmore, part of the Joining Hands Project in Bolivia — representing Presbyterian Christians like you and me to the people of Bolivia.<sup>iii</sup>

Our mission folk ask local residents what they would request of us — Money? Food? A clean water source? An outlet for Fair Trade products? Help in creating safe work environments?

Bob and Julie found a different and much harder request from the folk in Bolivia. They asked us to change the way we live. You see, very few folk in Bolivia drive cars. But cars (and cattle) are among the highest contributors to emissions of anthropogenic greenhouse gasses. And greenhouse gasses – among other things – are causing the Bolivian glaciers to melt at an increasing rate. These glaciers feed below ground aquifers, and thus our dependence upon such things as one or more cars per family, and frequent large portions of beef, can impact the health and livelihood of a Bolivian family — one that we will never meet.<sup>iv</sup>

This is, of course, only one example. It's perhaps even easier to see a link between our consumption and starvation in several African nations, or in Haiti. We know that we consume food at a rate that our planet could not sustain if it were true for all Earth's inhabitants. We know that this is also true of our consumption of other goods . . . clothing, medicine, recreation, and so on.

It's surprising to hear an economist and motivational speaker like Robert Kiyosaki, author of "Rich Dad, Poor Dad" be prophetic, noting that we must change attitudes, that “Consumption got us into this economic mess” in the first place.<sup>v</sup> And to hear Alan Greenspan a couple of years ago identify “infectious greed” as a destructive force in our society.<sup>vi</sup> This Lent, perhaps the temptation we are called to resist is the American mantra that our economy's health is driven by consumer spending, and the common adage that we should always look for the cheapest product – usually one that will be thrown away..

What can we do as citizens? There's no quick solution . . . change light bulbs, recycle, ride a bike, use less paper, turn the thermostat down - or up! But one thing we can do as Christians is to consider each of our choices as a matter of worship. Worship that is service to God, God's people, and God's creation.

When you buy an item of clothing — just for Lent, perhaps — consider paying a little more out of our relative wealth, in order to support a fair wage for someone on the other side of the globe.

When you buy food — just for Lent, perhaps — cut back on red meat; consider the great wrongs in factory farming . . . abused animals, dehumanized workers, and a polluted environment from concentrated animal

waste.

In *The Lorax*, Dr. Seuss says, “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,  
Nothing is going to get better. It's not.”

And Walter Brueggemann, a source more respected for his theology than Dr. Seuss perhaps, comments on the scriptural charge to feed the hungry, release the oppressed, shelter the homeless . . . Brueggemann says, "Notice how material the new spirituality is; it concerns *bread, home, body, flesh*, engagement with the painful dailiness of human wretchedness and need".<sup>vii</sup>

There's a new television show that is in stark contrast with much of celebrity-focused television programming. It's called "Undercover Boss" and I saw the first episode. "Undercover Boss" is a new reality show that offers a model for "material spirituality," for "engaging with the painful dailiness of human" life, and seeking to effect change. In the premiere episode, Larry O'Donnell, President and Chief Operating Officer of Waste Management, Inc., went undercover to experience the daily tasks of Waste Management's employees in various divisions. He picked garbage off a hillside, sorted recycling on a conveyor belt, took on a demanding multi-tasking desk job, and swung from the back of a trash truck as he collected residential trash. This was not just an exercise in "cultural tourism." When Larry completed his foray outside the executive offices, he debriefed with each of the surprised workers who had trained or supervised him in his undercover role. And then he initiated practical changes at the corporate level, informed by his experience "in the trenches."

The changes he made were not necessarily cost-effective, at least in the beginning. But they were supportive of the human beings employed by his company. His changes provided improved opportunities for advancement, for job stability, for better health and increased self-worth. Some of the changes were costly for his company, and the time he spent in the field was physically and emotionally costly for him.

I'd like to read for you - words from Isaiah 58, from the Ash Wednesday readings:

*Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.*

*Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*



Friends, let's become repairers of the breach – the breach between rich and poor, settled and homeless, clean and polluted, executive and line worker. Let us make costly choices in our necessary purchases and our food choices. Let us be in solidarity with those whose material standard of living is not equal to ours. Let us protect our common home, the Earth, through faithful reuse and recycling. May this be our Lenten discipline.

After all, forty days isn't so long... maybe we'll develop lifelong habits along the way.

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Dead Albatross and its stomach contents



Cigarette lighters  
in stomach of  
a dead albatross  
chick.

**ENDNOTES**

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- i. <http://sierraclub.typepad.com/insider/2007/09/the-deadliest-i.html>
  - ii. *Ibid.*
  - iii. Read more at <http://www.pcusa.org/missionconnections/profiles/dunsmorer.htm>.
  - iv. As told by Rev. Phyllis Zoon.
  - v. CNN 2/3/08.
  - vi. On Beliefnet, 7/27/02, in a sermon by Phyllis Tickle: “Greed: The Mother of All Sins.”
  - vii. Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching*, p.129, quoted in SermonWriter on Isaiah.