

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

"FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS"

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When I was a child, I had a dentist who was a sadist. He did not believe in giving children Novocaine when he drilled out their cavities. "Open wide," he would say, as he loomed over me, drill in hand. "But it hurts," I would respond, tearful and frightened. "But it's good for you," he would insist. "Now maybe you'll eat less candy bars." I would like to interject here that as a child I didn't even like candy bars. That aside, however, what I have carried away with me from those, my initial formative encounters with the dental profession, are first--an enduring distrust of all dentists, and second--an even more firmly entrenched suspicion of all activities and exercises which the initiator asserts will be "good for me."

Perhaps I am being unfair to my dentist... I have had a lot of other experiences over the years which tell me that as soon as someone tells you that something is going to be good for you, whatever "it" is--from prune juice to running to taking the "History of Christian Theological Ethics" in seminary--Whatever "it" is, "it" is going to be at best unpleasant and, at worst, both unpleasant and unhelpful.

Imagine my reluctance then, when about a year ago, my husband showed me an ad in the paper promoting the Court House, the racquetball club down on Superior Street. They were offering four lessons, racquet rental, several hours of free practice time, and a Court House T-shirt, all for the amazing low price of only \$19.00. "You should try this out," Chick suggested. "It would be good for you." In all fairness to Chick, he insists that he never said that it would be good for me. He also insists that he did not bring the matter up twenty times over the next few days, but I remember differently. Just to show him that I wouldn't like it, and to have an end to the matter, I went down to the Court House and signed up. And then an amazing thing happened. From the moment my first shot made a wonderfully solid, satisfying "thwack" against the front wall, I was hooked. As a child I had played tennis, and most of the exercise I got playing tennis came from retrieving balls from behind someone else's court, out of the woods, or dermomonically placed puddles. Tennis also taught me diplomatic skills: how to politely ask for my ball several times over agin from the people playing beside me, cultivating a properly apologetic look on my face and just the right tremor of embarrassment in my voice. Then came running, which I tried for two years. Every morning--rain or shine--I would take to the roads--two to five miles--hating it every step of the way.

But with racquetball, it was different. Surely this can't be good for me, I thought at the beginning, because I enjoy it too much. Here is a place where I can safely and constructively act out all of my hostile and aggressive impulses, something I can do at the end of a frustrating day, and come out of it feeling wonderful. I enjoy it so much that I even have forgiven Chick for suggesting it to me in the first place, and sometimes I let him win when we play together. Racquetball has been a good thing in my life, both physically and mentally. Sometimes I am even tempted to say to a prospective convert: You really should try this; it will be good for you.

Now the reason I am telling you all this is not because I expect you to be vitally interested in the history of my athletic endeavors, but because today is

the first Sunday of Lent. And if there is any time in the church year which calls up for me my traditional suspicions about things that are supposed to be "good for you", it is Lent. For most of my life, I have flip-flopped between working at some form of Lenten observance and avoiding the whole thing altogether because I viewed it as something good for me. I have undertaken Bible study and prayer, given up cigarettes and candy and red meat, exercised more, eaten less, worshipped more, played less, all with the same sort of humorless and grudging determination that I gave to running when I tried that: if I do this long enough or exactly enough, it will be good for me. I won't like it, but it will be good for me. It will, and here I interject another phrase which is about as joyless as "good for you", it will "build character."

I suspect I am not alone in this feeling about Lent, this sense that whatever is given up or undertaken during this traditional season of fasting and penitence is done in large measure as duty in its most oppressive sense or obligation, as something which will be 'good for us' rather than as something which will be rewarding and helpful, perhaps even enjoyable. And that is unfortunate. For if we take the biblical account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness as the basis of our Lenten observance, it becomes clear that grudging determination and dutiful observance are not what Lent is supposed to be about at all.

Jesus encounter with Satan in the wilderness happened in time immediately after his baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. We know from the gospels that Jesus's encounter with John was for him a truly revelatory event. It precipitated or brought into focus or somehow confirmed Jesus' sense of his destiny. It was the encounter with the Baptist which somehow brought to the fore Jesus sense of himself and his relationship with God. It was his baptism which caused Jesus to leave his life as a simple carpenter in Nazareth and begin his ministry of teaching and healing among the people of Judea. Such a change of life must have been difficult for Jesus, no matter what manner of signs and wonders it was accompanied by. He must have needed time to think, time to contemplate and try to understand, time to examine himself to see that his priorities were straight and consistent, that his commitment was sure. And so the Spirit led him into the Wilderness, a place of isolation removed from both the life he was leaving and the life he would take up on his return. The Spirit led him into the wilderness where he fasted forty days and forty nights.

Now fasting is a word which I think is as much misunderstood as "Lent" in our Christian vocabulary. In terms of traditional Jewish piety, out of which Jesus' understanding of fasting would have come, the purpose of fasting was not to make oneself uncomfortable, not the denial of food per se, but a distancing of oneself from the normal activities of daily life in order to concentrate on one's relationship with God. The "not-eating" part of fasting is only important as a sign and a physical reminder that the period of fasting is a time devoted to the relationship of one's spirit with God, where one tries to step back and view one's life from a different perspective.

So what Jesus was doing in his forty days and forty nights of fasting was not trying to improve his stamina, not trying to impress God or anyone else by his abstinence, but distancing himself from his normal run of worldly activities, there to concentrate on his relationship with God, to get his spiritual house in order so that he would be more ready, intellectually and spiritually, to live out the mission which lay before him. Jesus did not go into the wilderness because he thought it would be good for him, but because he wanted and

needed the rewards which that time of apartness would give him.

So where does this leave us? Well, I think it leaves us two places. The first is that just as Jesus took seriously the need in his life to make a time and a place to concentrate on his spiritual health and well-being, we also need seasons in our lives to stand back, to examine where we are in our spiritual lives, and to concentrate our energies on spiritual growth. We need times to distance ourselves from our usual routines and priorities, to reevaluate and strengthen who we are and who we want to become in light of our current understanding of God's claim on our lives. You know, it has always seemed inconsistent to me that so many people spend so much of their time and energy in dollars maintaining and improving their physical bodies when they know for a fact that those bodies are going to die, and so little time or energy or money taking care of their spiritual existence even though they believe that their spirits are eternal. There is a contradiction here. I read in some magazine a few weeks ago just what Americans spend on vitamins alone. I don't remember the figure, but it was astronomical. When you add to that, the amount spent on doctors and medical facilities, health clubs, weight loss plans, weight gain plans, food, cosmetics, and so on down the line, we are talking about a major portion of our incomes. And we have not even begun to talk about the time, the hours in one's day, given over to the pursuit of bodily health and well being.

In contrast, our approach to our spiritual being is both tentative and haphazard. I do not claim to know why this is, only that it is true for me, and for the majority of people that I know. "How do you take care of yourself spiritually; what are you doing about your spiritual growth?" someone asked me at lunch a few days ago, and I was embarrassed. The excuses came flooding out of my mouth. "I've been so distracted; I intend to do something but haven't quite got it organized yet. I'm so busy taking care of the congregations' needs that I don't have time to take care of my own--(That's every minister's standard defense.) The truth is, and I finally managed to tell my luncheon companion so, that I am mainly still running on the energy I got in seminary where it was easier to work on spiritual growth, and I have about run through my reserves."

We all need seasons in our lives when we take seriously our spiritual selves, times when something else sits on the back burner and gets "gotten to" later, and our relationship with God is allowed the primacy it deserves. For I really do believe that in ultimate terms, it is our spirits and not our bodies which are most important, and that holds true in terms of this earthly life as well as beyond. If we are to be whole and healthy people, we must make time for spiritual nurture in our lives.

We must take time for this spiritual nurture and growth--and this is my second point--we must take care of our spiritual selves, not because God wants us to, though I'm sure God does. We must make time for God not because it is our duty or obligation, although some would say that is a valid reason. We must take care of and nurture our spiritual being, not because of any grudging sense that it will be good for us, but joyfully, because we want it, because it is a primary need of human life, because any steps we take in the direction of spiritual growth and maturity will make us happier, wholer, more holy people, and that will be its own reward. I do not believe that anyone should undertake some "would-be" program of spiritual growth out of guilt, or a sense of wanting to prove their Christian macho, or to demonstrate anything to God or to their neighbors. We must take care of our spirits because that is what we want to do,

because we look forward to the rewards which will come from our efforts.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, the traditional season of the church year that Christians devote to spiritual growth and understanding. And I do not want to be heavy handed and insist that all of you use this Lent as a time for prayer and reflection, for standing back from the dailiness of your lives and reevaluating your relationship with God. I do not want to tell you all to use this time, for that would be telling you that it will be good for you. Perhaps there is a better season for you. But this season is here, forty days and forty nights of it, and because it is here, I would invite you to take some time to consider the state of your spiritual self, and then if that is what you want, to make the time and place in your life to let the spirit lead you into the wilderness, that you might reap the rewards which you would find there.