

“You Can't Have It Both Ways”

Genesis 9:8-17; I Peter 3:13-18

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 4, 2018 – 3rd Sunday in Lent - Rev. Ronald Botts

There's a story about a priest who was hurrying back to church and decided to take a shortcut through a dark alley. Suddenly a man stepped out of the shadows and demanded his wallet. As the priest opened his coat to reach for his billfold, the thief caught sight of his clerical collar. "Oh, never mind, Father. I didn't realize you were a priest."

Well, the cleric was greatly relieved and, as a gesture of good will, decided to offer the man a cigarette from his pocket. He started to hand it to the would-be thief, but the fellow waved him off. "No thanks, father. I gave up smoking for Lent."

Obviously that fellow had some gap in his catechetical instruction. He must have been absent the day they went over the Ten Commandments. He apparently didn't get the whole picture of what it means to be a follower of Christ, but then neither do a lot of other people. Thankfully, most don't turn out to be robbers.

Lent to many is a season of minor inconvenience, a time when a few lesser things are given up. Candy or movies or desserts are forsaken in the name of faith. Some people approach this period sincerely, but for others it may just be a second chance at a New Year's resolution that quickly went down the drain. Lent is a set time of 40 days and so it lends itself well to small sacrifices.

The real meaning of Lent, though, comes from a deeper understanding of renunciation. This annual period is a reminder of life's fundamental trade-offs: You can't have this if you want that. You can't do X if you choose to do Y. You can't go down two divergent pathways at the same time. You can't be a part-time Christian, when it calls for a full commitment.

Our New Testament text from I Peter talks about it being better to suffer for doing good than to suffer anyway in doing evil. "For Christ," he says, "also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit..." This writer tell us that in the life of Jesus something was lost but, at the same time, something more important was gained. Physical life was given up so that what was truly important could come to be.

The struggle between our two natures, self-absorbed versus self-less living, is a frequent theme in both the Bible and in literature. I find this conflict of the soul particularly clear in the novel and movie, *Madame Bovary*.

Emma, the daughter of a French farmer, marries a physician. She might have settled down to a comfortable, though predictable, life except for an invitation to a ball at the home of a nobleman—a grateful patient of her husband. This one evening introduces her to a whole new world. She was overwhelmed by the gilt chambers of the wealthy, the beautiful dresses of the women, the gallant posturing of the men. It was a place where reality took a back seat

and fantasy predominated. It was a false world made up of false people, and Emma found herself strongly attracted to it.

Throughout the story she gets pulled further and further into this new lifestyle, though she is a most willing participant. She likes what she has found and plunges headlong into it despite its cost. Emma takes a series of fashionable lovers. She borrows heavily to dress in style and buy gifts for her paramours, and finally she bankrupts her long-suffering husband. The family is ruined by her excesses. In the end she dies a tragic death.

What Madame Bovary thought was a better life actually brought her, and those around her, to destruction. The high life eventually proved to be the low life. The way of pleasure ended up only bringing pain. She took her considerable assets and made the worst possible trade. I think this story endures because it's true to life. Apparent gains often prove to be losses in the end. What may be great for a while can leave a wake of destruction behind.

It isn't unusual for a person to wake up one morning and feel that something is drastically wrong with life. He or she finds there's no more satisfaction, no real joy left to living. It's like a big hole right in the middle. So obviously something has to be done. Change is called for. Often, though, adjustments are tolerable as long as they are on easy terms. It's like the sick man who, when told by his doctor that the best thing he could do was give up drinking and smoking, replied, "And what's the next best thing?"

We're human. We want the gain, but without the pain. How can I lose weight without cutting down on any of my favorite foods? How can I receive that advancement at work without having to exert more effort? How can I find more satisfaction in life without having to change any of my priorities or behaviors? Given our natures we generally choose the easier course in life.

People are also drawn to the more exciting and glamorous. We like the glitz and neon, the fast pace and the frenzy. The problem is that these things most often do not lead us to where we really need to go. They promise a lot, but deliver little. Nowhere is this more evident than in matters of faith and meaning.

This lure of what the world says to be important is strong, and though possessions may bring us fleeting enjoyment, they are not really the way to greater happiness. Even if we're aware of this, we're often still caught up with trying to accumulate more and more. It's so habitual. We can find ourselves going down the same paths repeatedly, even though they lead us nowhere.

Lent is not so much about a renunciation of little things, though they can be stepping stones in the right direction, but rather a willingness to make wholesale changes in our lives. You have to think big rather than to consider small. It starts with a reordering of your priorities, then requires both commitment and work. It may also involve trial and error, moving forward then stepping back. Some people may not understand what's going on with you but, in the end, the rewards will be worth whatever your effort.

For those of us who have felt a bit lost in life, you might relate to author Kathleen Norris. Some years ago she moved from New York City to her grandparents' farm in rural North Dakota. It was more than just an inheritance that drew her there, but a feeling that somehow

this out-of-the-way place was pulling her like a magnet. Her rather dormant faith also seemed to be seeking something more and she hoped to find it again in the prairie.

“Step by step,” she says, “as I made my way back to church, I began to find that many of the things modern people assume are irrelevant—the liturgical year, the liturgy of the hours—are in fact essential to my identity and survival... I rediscovered the religion I was born to, and found in it a home.” (It was a Presbyterian church of all places!)

Jesus in fact calls us into communities because he knows the power of being with others for the long journey. It’s so easy to get lost, to stop and not want to get up again, to be so overwhelmed in solitary grief that we lose track of the Spirit in our midst.

Yes, you can go the way alone—and part of the time it’s absolutely necessary we do that—but most of the time we travel best surrounded by the support and friendship we find with others. Church communities give life to the fact of God’s love, make it real for us in very special ways, and help us come to grips with the difficult decisions that will always lie before us. Because others believe in us, we may just learn to believe in ourselves.

Lent can be a key passageway on our journey of life. It can remind us what’s truly important from what we **think** is important. It can allow us the perspective to make course corrections so that we’re more likely get to our final and intended destination—whatever that may be.

Lent is more than just a time to take note of. Lent is a time to use to our full advantage. How convenient then that it’s right here, right now. For this year, we’re only in week three and there’s still plenty of time to make the most of it.