



Preparing for LENT

Bothering to Love: One Priest's Modest Proposal for Lent

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In the Gospels Jesus says, "It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice." Here's a novel idea for Lent: why not take Jesus at his word? What have you given up for Lent?

That's what many Christians--from almost every denomination, and especially Roman Catholics--are asking one another this time of year. The most common thing to forego, I would wager, is some kind of food: soda and chocolate seem to be the Most Favored Sacrifices, with cigarettes and liquor running a close third. Each year, in fact, a Jewish friend from my college days calls me on Ash Wednesday to tell me what to give up, since he thinks my deciding on my own is too easy. Last year it was chicken wings, which was harder than you might think. (I'll save the story of how he came to assign my abstinence for another time.)

Fasting originated as a way of saving money on food, so that Christians could give it to the poor. It had a practical end: no meat for you meant more money for those who couldn't afford meat. Giving things up also reminds you that you don't always have to give into your appetites. It reminds you of your ability to exert self-control. And it reminds you of the poor, who go without every day, Lent or not. The Dutch spiritual writer and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen summed it up nicely: "For now, it seems that some fasting is the best way to remind myself of the millions who are hungry and to purify my heart and mind for a decision that does not exclude them."

Some people see Lenten sacrifices as another example of religious masochism. But look at it this way: People diet for physical reasons, so why not for spiritual ones? If you spend hours in the gym for a great body why not do something healthy to free your spirit from what St. Ignatius Loyola, the 16th-century founder of the Jesuit Order, called "disordered affections." Often Christians abstain from unhealthy things they've been unsuccessfully trying to avoid all year--like junk food or too much TV.

But this Lent I'd like to suggest not giving something up, but doing something. Specifically, bothering.

In the Gospels, when Jesus of Nazareth condemns people, or points out sin, it's usually not people who are trying hard to avoid sinning, it's people who aren't bothering to love. In the famous parable of the Good Samaritan, in the Gospel of Luke, two men pass by a guy lying by the side of the road, who could certainly use some help. They could help the fellow, but they don't. He rightly points out their sin. Jesus doesn't condemn those who are weak and trying hard; but those who are strong and aren't trying at all.

For Jesus, sin is often a failure to bother to love, what theologians used to call a "sin of omission." But during the weeks before Easter, most Christians during the weeks seem stuck on what they've been trying to avoid for years. A familiar hymn is: "I try to stop smoking every time Ash Wednesday comes around!" But if Jesus were around today (I know that's a dicey few words) he might say, "Don't worry about where you're already trying and keep failing. Look at where you're not even bothering."

So this Lent, instead of fasting, why not bother? Instead of a negative Lent, how about a positive one? Instead of giving up chocolate for the umpteenth year in a row, or trying to kick your smoking habit, why not bother to call a friend who's lonely? Instead of turning off your TV, or going to the gym, bother to donate money to the poor in Haiti. Instead of passing up potato chips, bother to visit a sick relative.

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