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When I was a child, I recall looking at Lent as a time of great sacrifice; not a willing sacrifice on my part, but a period when I would be subjected to all kinds of horrible demands from my parents and teachers to give up chocolate, potato chips, pop, or even tv! Now how often I really completed this stretch of time holding true to my sacrifice was certainly a very small number. Maybe it was even zero! I usually had at least 2 hours of parent-free time after school each day, there was a gas station just a half-block from my house, and candy bars were only 25¢ at the time. You can see how I was “set-up” to fail. Actually, I had no one to blame but myself. But in my defense, I didn’t really understand the real meaning behind this liturgical season. I surely want you to understand why we do what we do (and not do what we don’t do.) In my effort to help you grow your faith, I want you to be able to be successful at whatever Lenten challenge(s) you give yourself.

First off, Lent is the 40 day time period prior to Easter Sunday. This year it begins on February 26th. The first day of Lent is called Ash Wednesday. Last year’s leftover blessed palm branches have are burned. The residual ash is used to mark a cross on the forehead of each person. The ash symbolizes the dust from which we come and to which we shall return. It also is a sign of grief, our feeling for having sinned and separated ourselves from God. The ashes do make a visible acknowledgment of being a sinner, but also that we trust in the endless mercy of God to forgive the truly repentant heart.

There are three pillars of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Prayer allows for us to unplug from the busyness of daily life. Growing our relationship with the Lord, having the opportunity to reflect on our sins and their patterns in our lives, being truly sorrowful for the times we have chosen our own wants over God’s, and petition for others are all things to be accomplished through prayer. Fasting is the practice of reducing your food intake for a given amount of time. During Lent, we are directed to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. We show our humility by fasting throughout these days (1 full meal and 2 snacks that together do not equal another full meal.) We also abstain from meat on these and all Fridays during Lent. We do this for multiple reasons: to better understand the suffering of those who experience hunger or poverty on a regular basis such that we are led to a greater effort to alleviate this condition for others, to create a physical reaction of pang that should signify to us to turn to God to ask for strength to face the trial, and it creates an opportunity for almsgiving, charity for others. You can donate the money that you would have spent on your regular food choices/quantity. The Rice Bowl is an excellent place to collect these funds.

But these sacrifices need to be more than just something trivial. Do you really think God wants us to refrain from eating dessert or drinking beer?!? Whatever could He benefit from our doing this? Lent is so much more than just a short-term phase of deprivation. It is a time for us to truly change. What God really wants is our hearts! Make your sacrifice be a gift to God. Use it to drive yourself to make other changes where you reach out to others who are struggling. Allow the suffering to help you turn to God for support and encouragement. Be generous with your talents, time, and treasure. And continue being this “better” person even after Easter Sunday arrives.

And for those of you who checked your calendars, yes, there are 46 days from Ash Wednesday until Easter Sunday. The six Sundays during Lent are not intended to be days of suffering. In fact, they are mini-Easters, days to celebrate the Sabbath and the gifts of God. Now since each person’s penance is personal and should be what they need to work on. For those who have given up gossiping or losing one’s temper, then do not relax the Sunday fast. But if you’ve given up sweets, having dessert on Sunday may be a way to rejoice in the Lord. Use good judgement when deciding how to deal with Sundays.

Join us in Fellowship Hall after the pancake breakfast. We will be working in multi-age groups of people to learn more about what God’s expects of us and how we can grow from our Lenten experiences.

Blessings,

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