

The Stewardship of Lent

John Wilkinson

February 18, 2018

Mark 1:9-15

In this Year of Stewardship, I had planned this morning to explore the seemingly odd premise that Lent is a gift. Our culture, and even church practice, portrays Lent as a season for punishment, of self-denial. We have, of course, sought to counter that. Rather than giving something up, we say “take something up,” which makes Lent easier to think about as a gift, an opportunity.

Lynette Sparks this past Wednesday preached about Lent as a season of self-reflection shifting from the notions of self-denial and blame toward healing and wholeness, what 20th century priest Thomas Merton identified as the move from punishment to restoration. I had planned this morning to talk about that shift in our understanding of Lent, and why, therefore, Lent could be received as a gift, and our stewardship of it.

Included in that consideration would have been a sidebar into what popular media is telling us people are giving up: food (chocolate or wine), technology (Facebook, Instagram), habits (swearing, marijuana, Starbucks, complaining). The list can be amusing – someone responded in a survey that there were giving up self-discipline for Lent – made all the more humorous by the confluence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day. Perhaps you saw one fake Valentine that said “Happy Valentine’s Day, you miserable offender.”

In what I had planned to explore this morning, I learned that among Americans who observe Lent, 57% will fast from a favorite food or beverage (I am doing that). 57% will attend church services. 39% will pray more (I am *trying* to do that!). 38% will give more. A quarter or a third will fast from a bad habit or, conversely, fast from a favorite activity. My point would have been that we have, over time, been puzzled by Lent because we have misunderstood it. Our calling, our opportunity, is to understand it in a new way, or better yet, to understand it again in a much more ancient way, as a gift.

I still believe that, that Lent is a gift, an opportunity for self-reflection, personal and communal, that leads to healing and restoration. And that is what I planned to explore. I still do, in a way.

But first, a story. When we lived in Chicago, before Ann was born, we took Kenneth to a neighborhood, in-home, day care. I remember distinctly April 20, 1995. Anna, our wonderful provider, said to me “I bet you’re glad he’s coming here, and not going downtown this morning.” I was puzzled for a brief moment, until I realized she was referring to the day before, when the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City had been bombed by Timothy McVeigh. 168 people were murdered – including many young children in child care, with hundreds more injured. I said that yes, I guess I was, and we both shook our heads at what a tragedy it was.

I thought about that moment this week – not the bombing itself so much but my helpless response as a parent. I thought about that on Ash Wednesday, with the notion of Lent being a gift. With you, I heard the news – a cross of ashes on my forehead – of a young man, Nicholas Cruz, old enough to buy an assault rifle but not old enough to buy a beer, with a documented history of mental illness, which is both to the point and obfuscates the point. He walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and opened fire. He killed 17 people, students – jocks and geeks and artists, full of promise – and teachers and coaches, who acted heroically, who literally laid down their lives for their students..

I don’t drop off our kids at day care anymore, nor do we put them on a school bus. Many of you do, your children and grandchildren. Yet even now I haven’t figured out a way to stop worrying about my kids (my mom worried about me until the second she died). So my Facebook feed on Thursday reminded me. Back then, in 1995, I should not have had to worry about any kid being blown up by a bomb at day care. Just as right now none of you should have to worry about your children being killed by gunfire at school. Nor, I must add, should any parent, including parents living in poverty-entrenched neighborhoods in Rochester, *ever* have to worry about their babies being randomly shot, a different manifestation of the same plague. And yet here we are, again. I grew up in Ohio; we had tornado drills. Now in that same school they have active shooter drills. How shameful and sinful and scandalous is that. What must our repentance be? What must our response be?

How can we, even now, experience Lent as a gift, as a time to move toward healing and restoration? How can I, and perhaps you, though I hope not to project too much, channel dismay, numbness, deep discouragement, outrage, grief – about the national disease of gun violence – and about all the diseases that afflict us, that we are either too weak or too indifferent to overcome?

Mark's version of the origins of Lent is lean and spare. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan. The Spirit descended on him like a dove – just as, we pray, it descended upon young Will and Maya as they were baptized this morning. A voice booms out identifying Jesus as the beloved Son. And then, immediately, that same Spirit drove Jesus to the wilderness. Forty days, hence the 40 days of Lent. He was tempted by Satan (other gospel versions detail those temptations). He was with wild beasts. Angels cared for him. Then his ministry began.

How can we see that as a gift? Where do we find hope? I am not sure of the answers to any of those questions. But as a person of faith, in a room full of people of faith, I believe in hope, so I must pursue the answers. Because I believe we are not destined, not created, to dwell forever in wilderness. That ultimately is called Easter. We must travel through Good Friday to get there.

So for a season, we find ourselves with Jesus in the wilderness. There are wild beasts – on personal levels we call them job loss and cancer and depression and addiction and estrangement. On communal levels we call them #metoo and bullying and Ferguson and Sandy Hook and Pulse and Charlottesville and Sutherland Springs and Las Vegas and now Parkland.

What do we do?

What about *thoughts and prayers*? I've read a great deal about the inadequacy of that response this week, and I certainly get it. First, when we say it, we really need to mean it. Because we *are* thoughtful people. And we *are* praying people. What really matters is what we do with those thoughts and prayers, what actions those thoughts and prayers lead to.

We need to think about root causes, think for ourselves, think in community. This may be political, which makes us uncomfortable. But it is certainly not partisan. I

have read and re-read the Second Amendment. I am no politician or lawyer or legal scholar, yet it seems to me that this is not what our founders and framers had in mind. As much, therefore, as I seek to follow the one we call the Prince of Peace, who taught us to turn swords into farming implements and, I suppose, by extension, assault rifles into even better farming implements, why cannot we talk about what the pundits call “common sense gun legislation.” I spoke with a city principal after a previous shooting, and she laughed at the notion of her being armed. Even in gun-owning households, 93% of Americans support some form of background checks. (Nicholas Kristof, February 17, 2018, *New York Times*)

Or why can't we treat gun violence as a public health issue, as we did with seat belts and smoking? I, personally, would go further; but can't we go at least that far? Can't our thoughts lead us to that? And perhaps this time, for the first time, we listen to survivors, and we listen to the students, the young ones among us chanting just yesterday "no more guns."

And then, at a deeper level, can't our prayers lead us to action – in this Lenten, wilderness season. How did we get where we are? How do we look, as a people, at our collective soul, at our national heart, and repent, for our numbness and acceptance?

My Lenten discipline is now taking shape – daily prayers for repentance and daily prayers for wisdom. Reading that takes me beyond the regular echo chamber. I will write my legislators, locally and nationally, not as pastor but as citizen and father and person of faith, and ask them to do something. Do something.

We will have a gathering here on Sunday, March 18 at noon. Details are developing. We will look at statistics and strategies and practical, concrete responses. Thoughts and prayers that lead to action.

But to Lent. And that wilderness. Jill Duffield writes: “The power of the One who names us, claims us, calls us good and sends us remains with us always... expelling us from safety, but upholding us through the wilderness, saving us from the wild beasts and sending angels along the way to nurture us while we wait for gentler seasons.”

Jill writes: "That's the divine interference we need if we are going to survive the inhospitable, frightening, evil seasons that come when we are sent to do the work of God in the world that does not recognize the very One who came to save it...our darkest seasons are not God-forsaken, " Jill writes, "they are Spirit-infused." (February 12, 2018, *Presbyterian Outlook*)

I believed that on Tuesday and I believed it on Thursday. On the day in between, with ashes on my forehead and a forty-day journey ahead, I was called to believe it even more profoundly, as, really, we are called to believe it every time we read the paper or scroll through the news on our phone.

Our faith teaches us that we will not stay in the wilderness forever. I pray without ceasing that that will be true in terms of this gun-violence epidemic. Yet we will only get out together, and we will only get out by the grace of God, who will help us face the wild beasts, and who will provide angels along the way. Amen.