

Preaching Lent: Challenges and Opportunities

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Preaching Lent is something of a countercultural challenge. No other season of the church year stands in quite such marked contrast to the style and spirit of American life or presents Christians with more culturally problematic demands. American culture is deeply, pervasively materialistic, hedonistic, and optimistic, while Lent is about repentance, soul searching, sorrow for sin, and ascetical disciplines of self-denial. To preach the values and disciplines of Lent in a nation obsessed with polar opposite values requires a bit of imagination and probably a fair dose of courage for challenging dominant cultural imperatives and assumptions.

As they face into these headwinds, preachers might give some thought to how their congregations are likely to think and feel about Lent. The more pious folks in the pews are likely to make an effort, usually not easy even for the most religiously committed, to “give up something for Lent” or try to get into the somber frame of mind that Lent is presumed to require. But I suspect that many others are more or less bewildered by its themes of ascetical practice, sorrow for sin, and meditation on the sufferings of Christ that climax the long Lenten season on Good Friday. The joy of Easter is obviously easier to celebrate; Lent by contrast is a time for pondering the mystery of suffering (Christ’s and perhaps our own), a time of self-abasement if not a ritualized guilt trip that fits uneasily into the positive optimism of American society. Lent is a time for doing without, for purging and cleansing, for purification, for Christians to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” (Heb. 12:1), in contrast to our society’s materialistic imperative to accumulate more *things* and have ever more sensual and gratifying *experiences*.

Lenten themes of contrition and self-sacrifice also stand in a certain tension with the psychological and therapeutic values so meaningful and important to many Americans today, including many mainline church members whose lives, marriages, and relationships have been helped and healed by one kind of psychological therapy or another, within or more likely outside the church. We are taught by our therapists to understand, compassionately and empathically, the sources of our discontent, and to work through emotional and behavioral dynamics in relation to the significant others in our lives in order to achieve more constructive and healthy patterns and practices of feeling, thinking, and living. Repentance and sorrow for sin before God and disciplines of self-deprivation are not a part of this process. For many psychologically cultured Americans, such practices are old fashioned themes rooted in an outdated, guilt-driven culture. For the psychologically sophisticated, the task is not to confess sin before God in or through the church, to repent, and to devote oneself to a new obedience of faith, but to come more pragmatically, psychologically, and individualistically to recognize and accept the many factors that cause our unhappiness and failures in life, to face up realistically and compassionately to our own role as well as that of others in causing them, and to work emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally toward more effective and satisfying ways of living, relating, and being human.

Indeed, our psychological culture offers important critiques of many aspects of traditional Christian piety and practice (especially its emphasis on guilt, self-denial, submission to authority, and moral and religious intolerance), in contrast to the pragmatic processes of psychotherapy—to say nothing of secular psychology’s critique of the more extreme forms of Christian asceticism associated with self-denial, self-sacrifice, and self-punishment (e.g., flagellation and “mortification of the flesh”). Psychotherapy is a creation of modernity, and modern people often find it difficult to fully appreciate, much less give themselves to, the old religious therapies, once they have experienced the healing wisdom of modern psychological care or experienced it through the ministries of their own clinically educated pastors or learned about it through popular culture.

It would be a mistake, however, to draw too strong a contrast between the themes and values espoused by Lent and those of modern psychotherapy. There are indeed differences, not only in practical method but in worldview and to some extent in ethical outlook. But modern psychotherapy does not typically trivialize guilt, shame, anger, and hatred, or the behaviors that give rise to them, nor does it deny the role of personal responsibility or the importance of having moral values and even possibly spiritual sensitivities, beliefs, and devotion. From a psychotherapeutic perspective, Lent need not be a season for wallowing in guilt and punishing oneself by giving up things to atone for one’s badness. Psychologically owning up to one’s shortcomings and seeking to get one’s life on a better footing need not be forms of self-rejection or self-hatred; they may be mature, healthy, self-affirming, and life-affirming practices; and casting off sinful behaviors, if genuine and realistic to one’s true motives, may be a truly liberating, maturational experience.

Nonetheless, the Lenten season, even understood in the most positive, life-enhancing ways, does confront Christians and their preachers with something more than psychotherapeutic wisdom. Lent speaks of a world of moral meanings and spiritual values that include, but reach well beyond, the secular vision of psychological culture. It concerns ultimate issues of life and death, God, sin, evil, the salvation of an estranged, distorted, and destructive human race, and of individual souls caught up in the great mysterious drama of human history before God. Popular culture, even psychologically sophisticated popular culture, scarcely knows what to do with such expansive, existential meanings at the heart of Lenten devotion and practice—which is all the more reason we need to preach Christian faith to a secular world, some of which is sitting in the very pews before us.

So Lent offers a challenge, but also an opportunity for preachers to (1) distinguish the true meanings and values of Lent from its moralistic perversions and cultural counterfeits, those of the secular culture, but also those of our own religious tradition which has its own perversions and problems to critique and correct, and (2) invite our congregations into a set of practices and ways of thinking that offer a more truthful and profound universe of meanings and values than that which our secular, materialistic, technocratic culture has to offer.

Of the many themes embedded in the season of Lent, I will focus on two of the most prominent that I believe are most in need of thoughtful interpretation from the pulpit today: contrition, or sorrow for sin, and sacrifice, or giving up things for Lent (ascetical practices). Both themes run deeply counter to much of contemporary American culture, and both themes are also problematic, pastorally, in our own religious

history. Together they each present a double challenge to the preacher.

Contrition, or Sorrow for Sin

The Lenten season is one of stock-taking, of acknowledging one's shortcomings, earnestly repenting of them, and dedicating oneself to an amended way of living. There are, of course, secular versions of this idea in the popular culture of self-help in which people are encouraged to face their problems and shortcomings (such as overeating or overspending) and to make constructive changes, usually with the help of psychological techniques such as retraining one's thought processes to think more positively, forming better habits, and learning more effective social relations skills.

The Lenten version of this idea goes deeper. It calls us to examine our most fundamental values, beliefs, and individual as well as collective practices, and our most seriously distorted failings of character and social behavior in light of God's will for our lives—the ultimate meaning of life given in the Gospel through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is a tall order, one that challenges us to a depth of honesty and soul-searching that even the greatest saints have found beyond their human powers. It contrasts with the popular culture of self-help, however, not only in its relatively greater profundity (versus the comparative triviality of the secular techniques, helpful as they may be as far as they go). The more significant contrast lies in the Christian tradition's characterological claim that our problems are not limited to failures to practice this or that virtue or obey this or that commandment, but are rooted in a fundamental contrariness in our own souls that seems to resist and subvert all our good intentions in the long run and to ignore or defy God in their ultimate intentions.

There is much theological dispute about how deep into the soul our sinfulness extends. But we need not go to the perverse extreme of claiming "total depravity" (which ultimately denies the created goodness, the *imago dei*, in every person) to recognize that our sacred identity as children of God is at the same time at least partially distorted and "sinful." Our existence in the image of God is ineradicable and constitutes a fundamentally important affirmation for grounding not only our own sense of value, but our respect and care for all human beings; it has deep moral significance. But it is also sadly true that our *imago dei* is obscured and distorted; we are all, in some degree, given to anxious egocentricity, exploitation of others, complicity in social evils large and small, and much else, however much we may also continue to bear the signs of our divine likeness in our ability to care, to love, to seek justice, and to cooperate in the good works of human culture. Lent is a time for pondering and confessing this complex, even mysterious, certainly inescapable truth by both confessing and experiencing contrition for our distorted and failing lives, and for affirming the ineradicable stamp of divine likeness in our being. Secular self-help speaks only to the positive side of this assessment (which it attributes solely to ourselves, not to our relation to God), and therefore ultimately fails for being unrealistic to the full truth of our fallen natures that are nonetheless still rooted in a transcending, divine likeness to the Source and End of our identity in God.

There is, however, also a religious perversion of contrition which is, to put it bluntly, a sort of pious cultivation of, and wallowing in, moral violence and guilt. This is an interpretation of Lent and of Christian theology and spirituality that is probably the one many churchgoers have been taught to believe and practice as the essence of Lent

and of Christian faith and life. It comes in many shades of theological interpretation, but one popular version today, deeply rooted in the Bible and Christian history, holds that we are sinful creatures who have incurred the wrath of a righteous God, and our salvation has only become possible because God's Son endured unspeakable torment and death, suffering and dying for our sakes to satisfy divine honor or justice (the "satisfaction" theology of atonement). The suffering and death of Jesus should make us feel horribly guilty, for this sinless, loving, perfect human being, indeed God's own Son, had to undergo such horrors all because of us. But fortunately God has forgiven our sin through Jesus' atoning death, and we can now live deeply humbled, grateful, and obedient lives, never forgetting our sinful natures or the tragic necessity of God's sacrifice of his Son. Indeed, we too are now to live lives of sacrificial dedication, rejecting our own desires and needs, even denigrating ourselves, in the interest of the welfare and salvation of others.

This is more or less the popular version of this tradition; it is the theological picture of what many of our churches have taught our people for centuries in one form or another, and it holds powerful sway with many Christians today not only in many Evangelical churches but in those of the so-called mainline historic denominations, despite the liberal alternatives that have been put forth since at least the 19th century.¹ This "atonement theology" seeks to glorify God at the expense of human beings, and it both magnifies and seeks to suppress psychologically our aggressive, selfish, and hateful impulses. Its depiction of God as violent, salvation as a divine indulgence in violence, and human experience as saturated in guilt is morally problematic on many grounds, not least as a libel on God and an encouragement of hatred and violence toward the self. Unhappily, contrition, or sorrow for sin, has often been based on this kind of theology, thus encouraging an implicitly violent, guilt-driven, one-sidedly negative form of Lenten spirituality.

This is only one stream of Christian piety and tradition, but it is a powerful one still influential in mainline churches, and one that many mainline preachers probably need to address in some fashion. In light of this problematic religious history, it may be tempting for the preacher to avoid the theme of contrition and sorrow for sin altogether. But the challenge, and the opportunity, for the preacher is not to steer around these troubled waters, but to engage in a search for a better interpretation of this Lenten theme of contrition which, despite its potential secular and religious distortions, remains an important, even essential part of the Christian story. So the task for the preacher is to become, in a modest way perhaps, something of a constructive practical theologian of Lent, searching for a theological interpretation of this vital Lenten theme that is more biblically, theologically, and psychologically true to the meaning of the Gospel and true to human moral and psychological experience than the negatively distorted versions that have dominated so much of its history and homiletical interpretation.

What would such a constructive practical theology of Lenten contrition look like? I will suggest just a few possibilities.

First, a good theology of contrition ought indeed to search out the truth of our lives including our failures and the distorted moral core of our being, but drawing not only on individualistic self-examination but also on candid encounters with the critiques of others. We are simply not able to make a true confession for ourselves, so great is our sinful self-deception; others must play a role in our coming to know and

make confession for ourselves, as limited as that approach inevitably also is. More specifically, we have come to realize in recent years that it is particularly important, even essential, that our self-understanding and our moral and spiritual stock-taking require encounter with other persons and groups that are not our familiar associates, not members of our own tribe, but rather those who differ from us in socially significant ways: those of other cultures and races, other genders and sexualities, other politics, other economic classes and circumstances, other religions and no religion, and other historical generations and eras. Much has been said in recent theology about the moral and theological significance of encounters with “otherness,” in part precisely because, in our own self-justifying, psychologically defensive ways, we are in fact not fully capable of critiquing ourselves truthfully. Lent today needs to be conceived as a ritually structured opportunity to seek out and practice such encounters, to open ourselves to a wider world, and to experience the liberation that comes from discovering truthfully how we are participating in various orders of injustice and dehumanization of ourselves and others. This kind of contrition is not easy and it is not comfortable, but it is, arguably, ethically and theologically fundamental to the wider meaning of contrition today. It therefore deserves not only homiletical attention, but creative ministries of significant social encounter in the life of the church.

Second, it is also important in today’s interconnected, global community to emphasize that sinfulness entails our inevitable participation in vast, collective social evils, not simply our own individual failings, though they are serious enough. Individually, we are complicit in these immensely complex systems of evil and injustice even if we are not willfully choosing to be, and even if we are making efforts to extricate ourselves from them and work for their elimination. Our whole way of life in America, our standard of living, our economic and political security, such as it is, rests on a national and global system of economic and political relations shot through with injustice and exploitation of whole classes and communities of people, at home and abroad. We are willy-nilly the beneficiaries of these systemic injustices in countless ways, nearly all of which we cannot directly control or influence even when we make conscientious efforts to do so. Modifying our consumption of fossil fuels and energy, for instance, is no doubt a worthy thing to do; but the reality is that individual efforts of this kind will not significantly change humanity’s looming climate disaster and the immense evils it will inflict on the entire human race, and disproportionately on the poor and people of color. One can cite countless other examples of such individual complicity in vast networks of social evils—racism, class privilege, environmental predation, and so on. It is easy to feel despair when contemplating the immensity of these evils and our own “caughtness” in them. But the social reality, and the theological truth, is that evil is not simply individual in nature; it is systemic, vast, all-encompassing, and dominating of our individual lives whatever our social status. This idea is biblical in scope; the Bible is very clear that sin and evil permeate the cosmos in some strange way, and that we are caught up in them (Rom. 8:20-23; Eph. 6:12). Contrition and sorrow for sin must therefore somehow acknowledge and articulate this formidable fact of our existence and point us beyond ourselves to the grace and redeeming presence of God in Christ, even as we seek to do what we can to resist evil and embody the reign of God in our world.²

Third, true contrition is never simply a matter of subjective resolve—heartfelt remorse and a promise to do better, important and essential as these are. Contrition

also involves follow-up action of some sort that embodies and expresses, and thus commits, the individual (or group) to what is being lamented from the past and promised for the future. Protestants in particular have always approached this aspect of contrition, which in the medieval church and subsequent Catholicism has been known as “doing penance,” fearing that “doing something” can easily morph into an attempt to earn one’s forgiveness and divine favor— “works righteousness.” But this possibility, which is very real and tempting, cannot be the whole story. For without taking some concrete action, it is equally possible to deceive oneself into believing that one’s word can substitute for one’s deed, that one has made a true act of contrition when the fundamental act of behavioral commitment is lacking. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven” (Mt. 7:21).

Psychoanalysts have identified a phenomenon called “primary process promising” in which an individual makes a promise with all due emotional fervor and resolve, but without a true, realistic, intention of fulfilling it through specific actions in the future. This psychological trick is seen often among children. A young child’s immature development is such that a promise is often little more than a desperate attempt to appease an authority figure and avoid punishment in the present moment (“I’ll be good! I’ll be good!”), with little realistic intention of carrying out the corresponding behavior in the future. Sadly, primary process promising, as this phenomenon is called, is all too common among supposedly mature adults as well. How many promises do we make with all good intentions, yet in many instances fail to keep? This kind of promising is usually partly unconscious, a psychological deception we play on ourselves; our conscious intentions may feel sincere, but the deeper motive may simply be to rid ourselves of a troublesome person or problem in the moment, with no realistic intention of actually carrying through on what we promise. Psychologically, mature adult contrition and sorrow for sin must reach beyond this sort of immature promising to a behavioral confirmation in actual deeds. This is, I suppose, the wisdom at the core of the ancient practice of doing penance. Rightly understood, such deeds should not be understood as punishments, ways of paying off a debt, or preconditions qualifying one for forgiveness, though the Church itself has typically misrepresented penance in such terms. Properly understood, penitential deeds are the behavioral confirmations, the follow-through, of the spiritual integrity of an act of contrition. They need to be “done” not as self-punishment, not as a paying off of debt, and not as a condition of forgiveness, but as an integral expression of contrition. “Faith apart from works is dead” (Jas. 2:26); more fully, salvation is by grace through faith active in love.³ Good intentions need to be embodied in behavior. More on this below.

Fourth, a good theology of Lenten contrition should also affirm, not deny or denigrate, the truth of our lives and lives of others as children of God, created in the indestructible image of God, thus beloved of God and worthy of respect, honor, just treatment, and loving care however sinful, destructive, and downright evil our deeds and intentions may be. This positive, affirmative note is crucially important in the practice of contrition and sorrow for sin to prevent it from becoming preoccupied with our own sinfulness and thus with ourselves, ironically excluding God and our own *imago dei* from the picture. To focus totally and exclusively on our own sinfulness, on how bad we are, is to deny or disbelieve not only our creaturely *imago dei*, but the grace and mercy and kindness of God. Contrition in the best sense is a practice of

reaffirming who we truly are in God's eyes, all of our sinfulness and distorted living notwithstanding. It is like saying, "This sin in me is indeed mine, I own it, but it is not *truly* me, not the person I wish to be, not the child of God I most truly am, and it's not how I wish to be or to live." Indeed, coming to such truth about ourselves is liberating, ennobling in its own paradoxical sort of way; it is an act of faith and trust in the goodness and love of God and God's creation of us as in the divine image more than an attempt to see ourselves, in all of our limited and distorted being, exclusively as sinful.

Giving Up Things During Lent—Ascetical Practices as Spiritual Disciplines

The most popular meaning attached to Lent for most people is the idea of giving up something—usually some hedonistic indulgence like comfort foods, alcohol, sex, or other pleasurable activities. The underlying idea in this game of self-deprivation is often a mixture of self-punishment (paying the price for guilty pleasures) and a hope that, by depriving oneself of pleasures for a time, one will grow spiritually strong (at least for a while). Ascetical practices in general have the character of sloughing off indulgences, setting high goals and priorities, requiring and encouraging a sense of self-control and self-discipline, and giving one a sense of taking the high road toward worthy ends. And they are typically empowering of the person (a sort of Samson syndrome). This is certainly evident in secular versions of asceticism as well—in diets, exercise routines, and in all forms of strenuous goal-striving. Such practices are psychologically similar to religious asceticism, though historically monastics and other saints have taken this idea to extremes by making such practices unduly harsh and painful (if not death-defying) and unconditionally binding over a lifetime. For ordinary folks ascetical spiritual practices, ritually encouraged during Lent, provide a lower voltage version of the same dynamic. Small but meaningful sacrifices are thought to be good for the soul from time to time, often rationalized as a bit of self-punishment to atone for sin and to offset sinful indulgences enjoyed the rest of the year, or simply as a way of tuning up spiritually.

Surely, there must be some value in any ascetical practices in our culture, given its materialistic, sensual, self-indulgent character (driven by an economic system built on the exploitation of human greed). There is clearly a need to put the brakes on excessive self-indulgence, short-sighted materialism, and compulsive greed. However, all ascetical practices, while serving many good purposes, can also become self-destructive (as in eating disorders and self-punitive deprivations and mutilations). They can also become socially dangerous, as when strenuous self-discipline, self-denial, and competitive goal striving support a drive to dominate, defeat, and destroy others conceived as obstacles, threats, or enemies. Such asceticism is frequently used to intensify loyalty to one's tribe, gender, race, or nation, reaching well beyond healthy or morally justifiable limits, as in our recent tragic histories of nationalism and racism. The extent to which this points applies equally to the institutional church and Christian history is worth some reflection.

In any case, what we see in these apparent perversions of a good thing is, I think, the underlying power of *aggression* in all ascetical practice, though the two are often closely intertwined. Aggression is not necessarily a bad thing. As I will use the term here, it is the life force, the power, the strength of the person to organize, discipline, and shape one's life toward desired ends. It is in fact not possible to achieve anything

worthwhile in life without making one's goal a priority of some kind, a task that requires organizing and directing one's energies in a focused and intentional way, and saying "no" to competing interests by either ignoring or defeating them. That is the constructive use of aggressive energy (assuming the goals themselves are good). There are, of course, countless ways in which aggressive energy can subvert constructive aims, run wild, and become an end in itself. And in many instances, the blending of constructive and destructive purposes becomes highly ambiguous, as in competitive sports or competition in the business world that can turn excessively hostile or combative, beyond the constructive bounds of normal competitiveness. Such ambiguity occurs often in military or police actions that may be necessary to preserve order and defeat evil, but may also get out of hand and become more destructive and deadly than can be morally justified. The management of aggressive energy toward constructive ends is one of the most fundamental tasks of human civilization, and perhaps the most difficult. But, theologically, we must not make the error of assuming that aggressive energy is inherently evil. Quite the opposite. Life and civilization itself would be impossible and morally chaotic without the power of aggressive energy because it is the means by which goals are sought, organizations, relationships, and institutions formed and maintained, and moral order achieved. Theologically, aggressive energy can be considered as among "the Powers" of God's good creation which, however "fallen," are also a good and necessary part of life for both individuals and society.

How does this reflection apply to Lenten ascetical practices, and how can it be used to assist the preaching of the spiritual wisdom of Lent? I will suggest but a few possibilities.

First, given the highly materialistic nature of our culture, driven by a relentless economic system that promotes, requires, and thrives on the stimulation of human greed, it seems necessary that Christian preaching push back aggressively in certain ways, even as we also enjoy and benefit from its achievements. It is important that we not simply condemn or moralize against the importance of material goods and all the values and life experiences that material prosperity makes possible. In that respect, our capitalist system is, at least in principle, an immensely powerful contributor to human welfare, as it has, in fact, done more to reduce the curse of global poverty than any other economic system devised by human beings in history. The theological issue here is not the inherent value of material wellbeing, which is in principle a given of God's good creation and a potential blessing to humankind. The problem is how to order and discipline material welfare toward other moral and spiritual ends, such as the cultivating of loving and just human relationships, the fair distribution of wealth between social classes, races, and nations, protection and care for the natural world, and the flourishing of intangible cultural values like freedom, justice, love, beauty, and truth. Material welfare, a good in itself, should not be allowed to dominate and dictate idolatrously to all other values and meanings. This in fact has happened in secular capitalism. It has also happened in its religious spin-offs like the economically comfortable, self-righteous "culture Protestantism" of the upper middle classes for whom Christianity can be little more than an ideological justification for class privilege and for the "prosperity gospel" of those who aspire to gain similar economic status and power. The whole culture of materialism must be prophetically questioned and challenged, even as material wellbeing is sought and appreciated as a human good, whatever its limitations and ambiguities.

Lenten asceticism thus has an opportunity to raise deeper questions about not only our materialistic, economically driven indulgence and greed and the injustice of our economic relations, but also about the value and importance of material wellbeing for all persons and communities. The pastoral challenge—and opportunity—is to work at creative ways of doing so. And preaching is one such opportunity. Are there ways that preachers can help congregations not only reflect on the perverted economic conditions of our common lives, but also devise exercises—ascetical practices—that will help raise consciousness and re-envision what is truly important and meaningful in life beyond our creature comforts and anxieties, opening our eyes to economic injustice and empowering us to seek the economic and ecological welfare of all?

What ascetical practices can we devise to help us become more aware of the larger ends and purposes of life than material satisfactions provide, while also advocating for the economic and material wellbeing of those deprived even of life's basic material goods and necessities? Are there ways that “giving up something for Lent” can be an exercise in social as well as personal transformation—a repentance, a *metanoia*, of heart and soul? For example, what if giving up certain comfort foods were linked to engagement with the local food bank and the ministry of food to the poverty stricken? Or, what if it were joined to political action with local politicians and governments or to private business enterprises that pertain to food availability, like the need for grocery stores to provide nourishing food in urban “food deserts”? What if Lenten asceticism were tied to environmental and ecological concerns related to how food is produced—to animal rights, to chemical pollution in agribusiness, or to the production of unhealthy food products? Or what if foregoing expense travel were directly coupled with political action on the climate crisis? Such linkages would put real teeth into Lenten ascetical practices, lifting them beyond individual and perhaps trivial or sentimental levels of spirituality to more morally meaningful and challenging forms of spiritual growth and social witness.

Second, given the inherently aggressive nature of ascetical practices of all kinds, I think it important to include in sermons some theological help with interpreting their spiritual value, but also their spiritual limitations. The important point here is to emphasize that ascetical practice is not to be confused with self-flagellation or punishment—“suffering for one's sins.” Jesus did all the suffering for sin that is needed. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not the good news of self-denial in the sense of self-punishment, self-rejection, or self-hatred; it is the good news of divine love, compassion, and care for the right ordering of our lives in God. “Gospel” and “Law” go together with faith, hope, and love as the ultimate, indestructible spiritual realities rooted in God that give life and redemption to all of our efforts at the moral and practical ordering of our lives.

The point of ascetical practices is not to put the ordering process first or to make it the supreme value. It is rather to lift our eyes unto the hills from whence comes our help—that is, to remind us that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, and that that Word is loving, just, true, and beautiful. We seek to bring our lives into good order in many ways, including the periodic practice of ascetical disciplines. Such practices are inherently a good gift of the creator, given as necessary aids in living well. It is a perversion of the good gift of ascetical discipline, however, to make it anything less than a practice that enables us to experience and celebrate, or at least glimpse, the wonderful, life-giving truth of

the Gospel. This includes, but reaches far beyond, our daily material existence and the necessary but not sufficient systems of economic productivity and distribution that our society provides. Ascetical practice is ultimately not simply about our doing something for our own benefit or that of others but about helping us perceive and receive the good gift of God's grace, thus enabling us to live more fully and with more life-giving order and purpose into the reality of the divine life freely given to us in and through the material, social, and cosmic reality of God's good creation.

A Concluding Note on Preparing Sermons (or Teaching Events) in Lent, or Anytime

I am not an experienced pulpiteer, and I hesitate to offer advice to those who practice this ancient and most challenging of liturgical arts. But as one who has done some preaching and much church-based teaching that has had a strong homiletical cast, I wish to offer, from a pastoral theological perspective, a few ideas about preparing sermons and teaching events that have emerged through my own experience that may be helpful to those who practice this challenging art week by week. For I am at least convinced that preparing to teach or preach is truly a kind of spiritual discipline in itself, one not unrelated to the themes of Lent we have been considering. For there is entailed in homiletical practice, whatever the text or occasion, both a discipline of contrition and a discipline of ascetical practice.

It seems to me that both preaching and theological teaching, when done well, entail attending to three fundamental concerns: (1) the biblical and theological content or "message" to be proclaimed or taught, including its internal questions and issues; (2) the social context of those who gather to hear it with its many ongoing conflicts and concerns; and (3) the personal needs and spirituality of the preacher her- or himself. These points may be obvious to those who preach regularly, but not necessarily so. In any case it is deceptively easy to ignore or shortchange the focused attention that each of these considerations rightly requires.

A large part of the spiritual discipline of sermon preparation seems to me to lie in the difficulty in shifting from one of these areas of concern to another and back again, taking each one seriously but not getting stuck in any of them, then allowing the three to merge creatively into a whole that transcends its parts. I do not, however, think of these concerns as an ordered sequence, as if "content" precedes "context" precedes "person." The order in which they are taken up (and often revisited) is entirely up to the intuitive insight of the preacher and the flow of the Spirit. Such flexibility in ordering them and moving back and forth among them is essential to the creative process. Nonetheless it is important to touch each of these bases in some serious, intentional way if a sermon or teaching event is to be theologically sound and responsible, creative, in touch with its hearers and their world, and true to the heart and soul of the preacher.

(1) Focusing on the content or "message" means giving concentrated attention to both scriptural exegesis and theological reflection of a sustained and serious kind, including its various questions and complexities, without the distraction of worrying in the first instance about "how it will preach" or how it may be "relevant" or any other external consideration. And it may be that the preacher will first attend to contextual or personal considerations—the circumstances of the congregation or the situation, or to the preacher's own feelings, insights, needs, and fears, before turning to the exegetical and theological issues. But serious, focused, critical biblical and

theological thinking requires concentrated, undistracted attention at some point. It is, in fact, an act of contrition and ascetical discipline to set aside other concerns and distractions and humbly focus on the themes at hand, difficult and uninteresting or frustrating though they may be. For example, in Lenten preaching, it really is important that the preacher think through the sorts of issues I have discussed in this article (and others), such as the question of what defines true contrition and what it means that “Jesus died for our sins.” We cannot adequately resolve these immense, historic questions, certainly, but we do need to recognize how they are embedded in the more obvious, perhaps practical aspects of our sermon and teaching topics, and give them serious attention in their own right as a spiritual discipline of sermon preparation.

(2) Context here refers both to the immediate congregational situation and the wider community, including possibly the national and global situation. What is going on here? is the key question, referring not only to the public events and circumstances of the day, but to the way people are feeling and thinking about them. This includes, during Lent, the more specific question, What is the congregation feeling about Lent itself? Does it have any meaning at all? Is it just one more religious obligation to cope with? Does this season put people in touch with their accumulated concerns, fears, and sense of guilt? What else is going on in their minds and hearts, and in their personal and public lives? What issues are animating and dividing the congregation and its wider community at this time? Or the nation’s?

But the greater challenge of contextual reflection is how to do so fairly, objectively, and truthfully, rather than simply indulging in our own prejudices and preconceptions. A certain humility is required, and a certain discipline in serving the interests of truth. Perhaps the hardest form of this discipline is therefore trying to see the situation as we imagine God may see it and not simply as we wish to see it. Whether this is even possible is a legitimate question, but I believe it is an ideal toward which our efforts should aim, with all due contrition and self-discipline.

(3) Then there is the much more personal issue of what the preacher her- or himself is experiencing—feelings, attitudes, problems, tensions, hopes, fears, including how one is feeling about preparing the sermon at hand and how one is feeling about the larger context. It can be an uncomfortable experience to reckon with one’s own moods and musings, and strongly tempting to try to set them aside in order to get on with the task of preparing the sermon. But feelings and ideas unacknowledged and undealt with do not evaporate; they continue to haunt the preaching task and can easily distort a sermon or teaching event. Thus a certain contrition is called for in the Lenten preacher, an honest reckoning with oneself and with God, a kind of discipline of the soul, and an attempt, however faltering, to engage the meaning of Lent in personal terms as well as theologically and contextually. What does all of this Lenten tradition mean to me, now, in my own spiritual and personal life? But by the same token, it also becomes necessary to set self-reflection aside, to not get swallowed up in it. This too requires spiritual discipline, an exercise of contrition, and sacrificial discipline.

Finally, there is also a discipline required in allowing all three areas of reflection—exegetical and theological, contextual, and personal—to interact in the creative process of bringing the sermon together. Allowing this process to happen unimpeded is in itself a sort of contrition insofar as it requires stepping back, letting go of self-assertion and control, perhaps confessing one’s unworthiness or sense of insufficiency, and recognizing that the sermon is not entirely a process one can steer or determine,

but must take its own course in a spirit of grace and faith—a blending of unconscious creativity and deliberate, conscious craftsmanship. Any creative process including preaching requires this cooperative relationship between conscious and unconscious psychological forces; it is a participation in a movement of Spirit larger and more mysterious than one’s own ego-centered control.

Letting go of forced efforts at control and allowing the fundamental components of sermon preparation to come together in their own deeply creative way also requires a willingness to act concretely, putting one’s intuitions and creative insights into actual words and paragraphs. The task and discipline of actual writing, however, can be understood as a way of following through in word and deed on the preacher’s intention of listening to text, context, and self in a humble, open, contrite spirit; in essence, it is a sort of penance, a deed or deeds done to concretize, even “incarnate,” what is spiritually perceived in the preceding preparation, a way of embodying the authenticity of the preacher’s intentions and insights. Often such attempts to put things into actual words open new insights and redirect the whole in unexpected, creative ways. In any event, writing the sermon and actually preaching it thus have a peculiar pertinence to the themes of Lent, where we are called to let go of our usual, ego-centered striving for control, to open ourselves to the numinous work of the Spirit, and to proceed, as best can, to take concrete steps in words and phrases to embody the spiritual truths our preparations have glimpsed, all the while recognizing and affirming that we live, preach, and teach by grace through faith alone made active through love in works and words.

Notes

1 Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2017), 57-69.

2 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 25th anniversary edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

3 George Wolfgang Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther’s Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1959).