

A Sermon Delivered by
The Reverend E. F. Michael Morgan, Ph.D.
Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 29, 2009

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. (John 12:20-33)

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, and we are nearing the end of the Lenten season. Some would probably say – none too soon – and others surprisingly might point to the fact that this has been an opportunity to pay attention to serious self-examination and reflection on God's presence and involvement in their lives. It cuts both ways. This week for example, I came across a particularly interesting article on how young people are taking the disciplines of Lent to heart. Here's a brief report as it appeared in a Christian religious journal.

Most days you can find Adam Farrah on his laptop checking in with his classmates, looking at photos and updating his personal page on Facebook.

For the 19 year-old and many of his friends, the social networking site is something close to an obsession, "I'm on there a total of three hours a day – four hours on weekends," said Farrah, a student at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania.

But on Ash Wednesday, Farrah decided to quit Facebook cold turkey. No more status updates. No more commenting on photos posted by classmates.

In a new twist to an old religious tradition, a growing number of Christian technophiles swore off Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and other technology for Lent. Thousands joined "Giving up Facebook for Lent" groups on the site, replacing the photos on their profiles with boxes announcing that they will be absent for the next six weeks.

Religious leaders and scholars are encouraging the faithful to unplug from such sites in a virtual Lenten fast.

Well now, wait a minute.not quite so FAST – and I don't mean a Lenten Fast. Do these newer innovative technological disciplines count the same as giving up favorite foods or activities, as acts of contrition? Well who knows? Maybe so.

According to John Grimm, a Catholic priest-professor at Seton Hall University, who recently joined Facebook himself at the behest of students, "going on a Facebook fast (does in fact) count as a Lenten sacrifice in God's eyes." The idea, said professor Grimm "is to replace the time we spend doing something we enjoy with charitable acts, prayer, spiritual reading or something else that brings us closer to god."

Jozef Jankovic, a Facebook user from Michigan said, "I like the group because it really warns you about risks of virtual communication. Communication can be very helpful – but on the other hand (it can be) very seductive and addictive."

All this is well and good, though I'm not convinced a Facebook Fast is the equivalent of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. But let's be fair; this is a good start for young people who are taking their faith seriously. And that certainly is good news which we need to acknowledge.

Yet there are other issues that need to be evaluated and assessed now that Lent is winding down. From the vantage point of this Fifth Sunday in Lent we see the events of Holy Week coming at us very fast. And this begs the question of how well we have done accomplishing those goals that we set for ourselves over the past few weeks.

One of the local disciplines that a few of us with seminary training here at St. Peter's took on; was to meet regularly and try to discover where individuals encountered the living Christ today. Is it in the liturgies at church, in the programs and activities that emanate from the church office, or is it beyond the walls of the church itself and more likely to be found in the shopping malls and marketplaces of the wider community? And what about those growing numbers of people who seem to have little or no use whatsoever for religious activity? Does the Lenten season of penitence and preparation leading to the joys of the Easter season make any sense to them, or is it all an irrelevant diversion that is quite harmless?

We struggled with those and other questions at noon each Thursday, fortifying ourselves nutritionally with V-8 juice, bread, cheese, grapes, mixed nuts, and assorted veggie snacks. Equally plain and straightforward was the discussion around several doctrines and themes that bolstered our theological views. We looked at sin, salvation, confession, and redemption. Not everyone was in agreement, and each of us had a particular point of view that became increasingly clear as the weeks rolled by. But one thread seemed to permeate the discussion. If we are honest, the spirit of God seems to be a moving target, always just a little bit ahead of us; and that elusive spiritual quality makes it hard to get a definitive picture of what is happening in our personal and collective religious lives these days.

Since we live in a rapidly changing society and a multi-cultural world, it seems we are just beginning to assimilate the views of others, at the same time that we strive to make sense of our own identity and traditions as people of God. It is a conversation that will

likely continue for some time to come.

I mention this because I hope all of you too might join in the wider discourse of faith that is taking place on so many different fronts in varying contexts, particularly during these remaining days of Lent. We still have time to prepare the way of the Lord, to pray for the events of Holy Week that start next Sunday with the reading of the Passion Narrative and the traditional Blessing of the Palms. It is still a time for reflecting on what it means to be a disciple of Christ, and to that end I'll close with the same passage that I used at the beginning from today's appointed Gospel.

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. (John 12:20-33)

Those are helpful words of preparation for eternity, and we would be well-advised and wise to reflect on them seriously.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

Religious News Service: Christian Century, April 2, 2009