

“God’s Generous Heart”

Lent 2019 - “With All Your Heart” – part #1

Romans 10:5-15

I always have trouble packing a suitcase for a journey. I like to cram as much in as I possibly think I will need. The trouble is, once I arrive at my destination, I find that unpacking is a mess. I can’t find anything, because I have too much crammed in.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, a journey through the wilderness of our souls. For this journey, we don’t need to pack; actually, we need to unpack. Lent is a time to empty our baggage, to make room for what God has for us.

Many people think Lent is a time of sacrifice. They think, especially now, that God is watching us, wanting to see us suffer as we trudge through these 40 days. I think that’s why so many people give up chocolate for Lent. I would definitely suffer without chocolate! (Just kidding.) But still, people see Lent sacrifices as a chore. They have built their spirituality around the idea that “If I give up something I really like, maybe that will be a way to make up my shortcomings to God.” Allow me to me give you a different view of Lent.

The idea of fasting at Lent is a good one, if you get the reason right. Fasting does not impress God. God is not impressed by any of our good deeds. Isaiah 64:6 says, “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” But there is a good reason for fasting. It is to empty ourselves. It is to prepare ourselves for the good things God desires for us. God has a generous heart. God is full of grace, mercy, and love. But you cannot know generosity until you experience scarcity. You cannot know true joy unless you also know desolation. If you think you deserve grace,

then you don’t understand it. Grace is given freely to those who do not deserve it, but who long for it.

Paul says in Romans 10 that the Israelites were pursuing salvation all the wrong way. Go back to the beginning of the chapter. Paul longed for his Israelite brothers and sisters to know God’s righteousness, but instead they sought their own. It doesn’t work that way. You cannot earn your own righteousness. You can only receive the righteousness of Christ by faith. In all of Israel’s striving, they never received it. Believe me, even though they didn’t have chocolate, the Israelites knew how to fast! And a whole lot of other things. The problem is, they packed their bags full of stuff but left out God’s Son.

Contrast all this religious legalism with what Christ did. Jesus strove for us all, but not by packing his bag full of stuff. Not by giving up minor indulgences and delicacies. Jesus emptied himself entirely, dying on a lonely cross in submission to the Father’s will. Because of his striving, we all have salvation. Not because of our own.

When I was in school, I tried striving for things on my own. For nine years, I pursued engineering, trying to fill my soul. I even entered graduate school because I thought it would make me happy and make me employable. I remember coming home once from an interview with a construction company and being completely frustrated. I wasn’t getting anywhere on my own. I kept striving, kept going, but I wasn’t waiting on the Lord. God must have just looked at me and thought, “Whenever you’re ready to stop and trust me, I’ll be there.” When I hit rock bottom, God opened the door to youth ministry, which led to pastoral ministry. It was like I had finally unzipped the suitcase of my life and dumped all the contents into the garbage. That included literally selling all my

textbooks, and believe me, they were heavy! But when I finally gave God total control, I could be filled with his joy. I could minister to others. It was an amazing change.

That’s what Lent is supposed to be. Go ahead, give up things for Lent. Give up unhealthy food, sure. But more importantly, give up unhealthy habits, and instead let God fill you up with good things, like promises from his word. Have the discipline to let go and let God.

We all need to release something. What do you need to release? Sin? Greed? Hurt? Guilt? What needs to make space for God’s generous love in your life?

I want to show you an example of what I mean. I have two jars here. Let’s pretend these represent two people and this pitcher of water is God’s love. I can pour the water into the empty jar, and it will receive the water to the brim. But if I try to pour God’s love into the jar crammed with rocks, the water overflows. Now, granted, I like to see God’s love flowing out of people, but only when they themselves are filled with it, not when they reject it.

That’s what Lent is about. Emptying ourselves to receive God’s generous love. Notice what Paul says in Romans 10:9. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” That word, confess, is the key.

Confession has two related meanings. First, an admission of wrong doing, like confessing to a crime. Second, proclaiming a truth, a belief. Like, confessing Christ is Lord. We need to do both to receive the fullness of God’s love. Admit our failure, and proclaim Jesus as the one and only Lord of our life.

We cannot strive to fill our lives on our own. It didn’t work for Israel, and it won’t work for us. So, if God’s mercy does not depend on our effort or desire, then why bother focusing on holiness during Lent? Why give stuff up? After all, we can’t change God’s mind.

This is why: Lent cleanses us of the desires of the world, which block us from realizing the fullness of God’s mercy. If I am so full of hate and disappointment, when someone gives me a gift, I don’t even say thank you or enjoy it. When I am jealous of someone, I don’t even enjoy the relationships I do have. If I am envious of someone’s special treatment or luck, I forget my own blessings. I can think of billions of people who would trade places with you in a heartbeat. Lent then not only helps us conquer sin’s burden over us, it helps us see more clearly the good God has in store for us.

Look again at Romans 10:12. This verse is key to understanding God’s heart. “The Lord richly blesses all who call on him.” Call on him. Confess your brokenness. Confess that Christ is Lord, your Lord. And you will find that God does richly bless you.

This world is so full of brokenness right now. I know many of you are upset over the state of the United Methodist Church. Many of you are hurt, angry, and ashamed of the conversations in the wake of the special General Conference. People want to leave the church, leave this church, and some already have. My question to you all here today is, how do you want to respond to those you disagree with? Will you respond in grace, to those who stay, those who leave, and to those who come?

If you need to talk to me, my door is open. If you need prayer, have questions, or simply want to confess something in your life and make room for

God, please, don’t hold it in. The only thing I do ask is that you speak in love. I am not here to judge, neither are you. That is God’s job alone. Our job is to continue to be a people of hope, a people of resurrection. Christ died to redeem us. He knew his purpose, he attained his goal. What resurrection are you hoping for? And what are you willing to give up in order to attain it?

God waits patiently to overwhelm you with his love. Take the time this Lent to empty yourself of all that holds you back so that you can receive this generous love.