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Dr. Mosser's Blog

“Repent: Not Stylish”

From Ash Wednesday onward the time of Lent is about repentance and putting our spiritual houses in order—in order to receive the good news of the gospel. Lent is a time we journey toward Easter. Lent offers those who take the journey seriously an opportunity to experience the authentic joy of Easter. Just as Jesus overcame the grave at Easter, Lent helps us take stock of the things that we may overcome in this life, by God’s grace, in order to be more devoted to God’s summons.

The United Methodist Book of Worship describes Lent this way: “Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means ‘spring.’ The season is a preparation for celebrating Easter. Historically, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts and then became a time for penance by all Christians” (1992, p. 320).

Thus, Lent affords believers a time of self-examination, prayer, meditation, and reflection. In the early church, Lent was a time to instruct new converts for baptism, although in some of the earliest communities, people prepared for baptism for up to three years. This is moderately different than the mother who calls and says, “Pastor you do not know me as we don’t get by the church as much as we should, but Johnny and I just had a baby a few months ago and his mother is nagging us to get the baby dedicated.” We interrupt at this point: “Ma’am we baptize infants here as well as dedicate them.” Her response, classic: “Really?—whatever . . .” Our conversation devolves from there. What would she have said if the church told her that we instruct parents for three years and then we talk about baptism?

In our modern times, for those who are old-fashioned enough to observe the Christian year, we focus on our relationship with God most intensely at Lent. Some churches encourage people to give up something for Lent, while many households of faith typically encourage volunteer work and giving ourselves to others for Christ’s sake. These forty days (excluding Sundays) represent Jesus’ time in the wilderness—where Jesus strove against the tempter. People sometimes ask why the church excludes Sundays from Lent’s forty days. Lent’s forty days exclude Sundays because the Sabbath represents a “mini-Easter” observance of God’s victory over sin and death through the Jesus’ resurrection. Every Sunday is a “mini-Easter.”

Two things we note here: First, some churches disdain ashes and penitential services noticing that Jesus said, “. . . whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites . . . but when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others” (Matthew 6:16-18). Second, in today’s world that seems so Hades-bent on blaming someone somewhere for whatever goes wrong, ironically no one seems responsible for anything anymore. Thus, some religious people think repentance is too dismal and others more secular folks think it out of place to their circumstance.

In our country we believe in standing up for the right, so I suggest that if you believe God can forgive your sin, then fall on your face and take God's grace like a Christian.

Come—Worship

Stay—Learn

Go—Serve!