

In the name of God – who calls us to serve, Amen.

Let's be quiet for just a minute. Just listen. And not with your ears ... listen with the ears of your heart. Do you hear it? It's there; a quiet but persistent voice. We are being called. Over the last several weeks I have spoken about God's call to us – the call to be disciples. Today's readings bring the theme of being called to discipleship into a new clarity. On Ash Wednesday we are reminded of our own mortality and the sinful nature of all humanity. Those things are without doubt. But ... on Ash Wednesday we are also *called*.

The Book of Common Prayer calls us on this day. The call is to the observance of a Holy Lent. As we will hear in a few moments, the Church calls us to 40 days of “self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.” But the real call for this season comes from our Lord. In the Gospel reading for today, we get Jesus' call as set out the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew.

Jesus was speaking to His disciples in the passage we just heard. “When you give alms ... whenever you pray ... when you fast.” These are the things Jesus calls us to do during the 40 days of Lent. But notice something. Jesus was *not* calling the disciples to something new, any more than He is calling us to something new. No. He is calling us to something we have hopefully been doing already – He is just calling us to do these

things in a new and better way. Jesus didn't tell the disciples, "**IF** you pray, pray this way." Nor did He say, "**IF** you fast," nor "**IF** you give alms." Instead, He said "when." And then He told them, and us, **HOW** we are to perform our Lenten disciplines. Jesus calls each of us, during the forty days of Lent, to fast, to pray and to give alms – and to do these things with only one idea in mind, deepening our relationship with God.

I get more Lenten questions about fasting than about any other discipline. There are literally an infinite number of ways to fast. You can give up meat. You can give up meat on Fridays only. You can give up eating before sundown; or you can do that only on Fridays. You can give up sweets, or alcohol, ... or artichokes. It really doesn't matter *what* you give up. It matters *why and how* you give it up. Whatever you give up, you should give up so that the thing's absence makes you reflect on God more deeply and more often. But, as Jesus pointed out, you should not go around wearing a t-shirt that proclaims in big letters: "Don't offer me chocolate. I'm fasting because I'm a great Christian."

Jesus believed that we should all be fasting – on a regular basis – because hunger and thirst are great motivators. Jews of Jesus' time fasted regularly in order to make them reflect more deeply on God every time they felt a hunger pang. But also to remind them that without God, they would have *nothing* to eat or drink, because all things come from the God who created heaven and earth.

Jesus calls us to prayer, just as He did the first disciples. What that call means for you is between you and God. However, this is the perfect time to try something brand new, because typically we pay more attention to *new* things than we do to more familiar things. If you don't pray much, except for Sundays, try going to the front of the prayer book and using the forms for daily morning or evening prayer. And vow to do it daily for forty days. If you are used to using the daily offices, try something more contemplative – just sit quietly and concentrate on those who need your prayers. Don't tell God how to do the job, just concentrate quietly on the names and faces of those for whom you pray. Be confident that the Holy Spirit, which “intercedes with sighs too deep for words,” will convey the proper message. Or if you read the newspaper every day, try picking out a few of the stories and stopping to pray for everyone in the story – those you agree with and those you don't. Again, *what* you pray is not nearly as important as the fact *that* you pray. Remember, the best prayer is always, “God's will be done.”

But, as Jesus said, when you pray, don't call attention to yourself. Whenever and wherever your appointed prayer time might be – commit to praying, but do not put a sign outside that says, “Please do not disturb, a Christian is trying to pray in here.”

Finally, Jesus calls us to *continue* to give alms. What does that mean? By that term, Jesus meant much more than putting coins in the hat of a beggar. For starters, it means giving to the church. The Church exists solely for the spread and care of God's Kingdom, that is a good use of alms. If you've never given to the church on a regular

basis, now is the call to start – do it differently than you have in the past. If you’ve always been a faithful and cheerful giver – give more. I know what you’re thinking. There he sits, telling us to give more during an economic crisis, yeah right! But that *is* right. That’s what I believe Jesus is calling all of us to do right now. To stretch our understanding of who God is and what God asks and to rely completely on God’s grace. At the Episcopal churches that were damaged the most by Ike, even in the face of families being devastated by loss, giving is actually up, not down. That is the miracle of God’s abundance. That’s what we give thanks for, when we give alms.

Jesus wanted us to give alms – in other words, give for the care of God’s creation in every way we can. He said that we should do it “so that our right hand does not know what our left hand is doing.” The point being, do not give so that people will be impressed, give in thanks for what God has given you – and give sacrificially so that you remember the need to rely wholly on God. Jesus knew the exceptional power that money had, and has in the lives of people. That’s why He said for us not to store up our treasures – time, talent and money – here on earth; but to store our treasures in heaven – give them to God. “Because where (our) treasure is, there (our) heart(s) will be also.”

Fast. Pray. Give. These things will bring us to a Holy Lent. But not by magic. Only by doing what we do *solely* for the glory of God. Start today. As St. Paul says, “now is the acceptable time.” You can do anything for forty days. And who knows, maybe you’ll create a habit that will last a lifetime.

In closing, if you want to read the essence of what Jesus was telling the disciples – and us – look no further than the prophet Isaiah, whose writings Jesus undoubtedly knew well.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, ... to let the oppressed go free ...?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, ... Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then ... The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

In the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.