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Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco
Joel 2:12-13
Mtt. 4:1-11
Swedenborg. Love is our Life

Lenten Disciplines: Cultivating Guilt or Gratitude?

It is such a pleasure to be back here in this place with you. I have a special fondness for this church. The last time I was standing in this church up here near the altar was last November when I married my husband, Scott. For this reason I associate this church with love. But there are other reasons to associate this community with love. I know this church have a significant tradition of offering a worshipful place for weddings, because I have gotten to know your pastor Rachel and a some of you in this parish, I will always think of the Swedenborgian church here in San Francisco as a community centered on love.

So today I want to look at Lent and Love. Specifically I will explore some traditional preparations for Easter and their potential pitfalls during this season called Lent, and then I would like to reframe Lent by considering it within this context of love.

Now I'll admit that the subjects of Lent and Love don't usually go together. Usually when you think about Lent, you think about what things to give up for Lent. Traditionally Lent is a time of prayer, penance, abstinence, and self-denial. So you may be wondering what does Lent and Love have to do with one another. In fact when I submitted to Rev. Rachel the readings and the title, she said, "Oh, I thought you had said you were going to talk about Love?" When I responded, "Oh I intend to!" She said, "interesting." But I really do think that Lent and love can go together.

Lent: Our two Scripture passages today set the tone for the traditional practice of Lent. And the tone is serious and grave.

In Joel we read that God is a benevolent God and doesn't like to punish us, but that we are to whole-heartedly—with all our hearts—return to God with mourning, fasting, weeping, and rending our hearts....Just to make sure I knew what Joel was talking about, I pulled out my dictionary and learned that it's as severe as it sounds: by mourning, we display outward signs of grief; by fasting we abstain from food or at least eat sparingly; and by rending our hearts we tear them forcibly apart. So the passage in Joel urges us to tear our hearts forcibly apart, and by doing so we may return to God's gracious love.

Keep that particular image in mind, because I do think our hearts are critical in Lent, but I won't be proposing that we tear them apart by force.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew the time frame for Lent is set by the 40 days that Jesus was in the desert [hence we have the 40 days of Lent, which are the 40 days before Easter not counting Sundays]. We learn that at the very least Jesus fasted and thereby prepared himself for the devil's temptations. His desert experience of asceticism—his fasting and prayer in the harsh climates of the desert—is the model for our prayer practices of Lent...in some circles these are called “disciplines”—the rigorous and sometimes harsh treatments of our bodies as a spiritual practice.

I won't be proposing such harsh treatment of our bodies, but these are at the heart of Lenten tradition. And there is still a widespread attraction to these kinds of penitential practices that are suggested in these two scripture passages. All you have to do is go to a large urban church that offers an Ash Wednesday service. Ash Wednesday was last week

and is the day that Lent begins. It is surprising and a little disturbing to realize that even more than Easter, and far more than on Christmas, church attendance in many church communities skyrockets on Ash Wednesday. The reason many people return to church on Ash Wednesday even if they don't go any other day of the year is to receive the imposition of Ashes in the sign of a cross on our foreheads. As the ashes are shaped on our foreheads, we are told some formulation similar to, "You are dust and to dust you will return. Repent and know that you are loved."

But for those people who receive only the ashes of Ash Wednesday and never even come back at Easter, they may remain in a Lenten outlook—specifically a Lenten outlook about religion and faith, but possibly more generally, a Lenten outlook about life. We can get stuck in the self-denial, even self-hating resonance of the penitential tone of Lent if we hear just "You are ashes and unto ashes you will return" without also hearing, "Know that you are loved." We risk getting stuck in an Ash Wednesday faith without also experiencing the joy of resurrection and new life at Easter. And without the Easter experience of resurrection, I think we run the risk of allowing our faith become one of self-loathing and merciless guilt. Or we can run away from faith altogether to protect ourselves from this self-loathing and guilt.

Of course, another approach is to by-pass Lent altogether and jump right to the big pageant of resurrection at Easter. But without the gravitas of Lent, we risk turning Easter into a show with pastel decorations that is pleasant to present to our children, but lacks the depth of adult faith that the serious implications of Christ's resurrection have. Anne Sexton writes poignantly about this kind of what I'll call Easter-egg-faith in her

poem “Protestant Easter, 8 years old,”: “I knew that when he was a little boy, Jesus was good all the time. Then they pounded nails in his hands. After that, well, after that, everyone wore hats.” For the young Anne Sexton, Easter was about Easter bonnets and probably Easter baskets. While we may begin to teach our children about Easter through nice hats, without Lent, I think we run the risk of allowing our adult faith to become a faith of wearing hats. Our faith becomes trivialized and superficial.

So where can we in this community turn if we desire to cultivate a faith that is mature; a faith that is both joyful and serious; a faith with depth?

A faith that participates in both Lent and Easter deeply and seriously.

Some answers may be found in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, especially in his writing about love. At the very beginning of his book *Divine Love and Wisdom*, he writes:

“Love is our life....Even though the word ‘love’ is so commonly on our tongues, still hardly anyone knows what love is. When we stop to think about it, we find that we cannot form any image of it in our thoughts, so we say either that it is not really anything or that it is simply something that flows into us from our sight, hearing, touch, and conversation and therefore influences us. We are wholly unaware that it is our very life—not just the general life of our whole body and of all our thoughts, but the life of their every least detail.”

Swedenborg may be right that we do not know how to define this thing we call love. But we do experience love in our lives. And we can cultivate a way of life so that loving is our way of living. A discipline of cultivating love as the center of our life seems to me to be an approach we could take for Lent, since love is the foundation of the passion and resurrection of Christ.

To consider how we might cultivate love, I want to tell you a story. It is a story that is perhaps similar to Jesus' 40 days in the desert, although this story took place over 20 hours, not 40 days. And it took place off the coast of Santa Barbara in the Pacific Ocean, not in the desert. But like Jesus' 40 days, this is a story of personal transformation; a life-changing event that has shaped many peoples lives.

It happened about 15 years ago, in the early nineties. A graduate student friend of mine had recently separated from his wife. The constant study and minimal income had taken its toll on the relationship. So for all the publicly known and many more private reasons that lead a couple to separation, Jeffrey and Susan separated and she filed for divorce.

She moved back to her home in Santa Barbara, and started her life over. She was in her early 30s, attractive, and intelligent. And was soon dating again.

Soon she met an older man, who I'll call Mark. Mark was well established in his field; prosperous; and ready to settle down and start a family. The relationship was getting serious. It seemed like new life to Susan.

One late afternoon the couple went sailing. Susan's new man was an avid sailor who own his own boat. They had gone out sailing many times before, but her favorite time to sail was at sunset to watch the colors fill the sky and to see the lights in the city come up. This particular afternoon, though, the winds were trickier than usual. Although Mark was an accomplished sailor, the winds were challenging even for him. They didn't notice the sun going down because they were more concerned about keeping control of the boat. Suddenly a wave picked up the boat and it capsized. Mark was able to swim to the shore. But Susan hit her head on the side of the boat and thinks she was knocked

unconscious. All that she remembers is that when she revived, she found herself floating on a plank from the boat. And she was surrounded by darkness. Utter darkness.

For the next 20 hours she had a desert experience that changed her life. Her desert just happened to be the Pacific Ocean.

As she floated in the cold ocean water, buffeted around by the waves, Susan first noticed the obvious things: she watched the lights of the city of Santa Barbara twinkling and tried to stay focused on those lights. Then she considered the big interests of hers: she considered how beautiful the city is. She thought about her family and friends and how much she loved them. And then she started listing all the particular acts of kindness, personal traits, funny idiosyncrasies of everyone in her life whom she loved.

She knew the waters were shark infested; she knew hypothermia was setting in. She was keenly aware there was a chance she would die.

And so she prepared her self for that end, by considering every small thing she was grateful for: she was grateful for her mother's way of laughing; she adored her younger brother's absolute dedication to the Chicago Cubs; she remembered her first grade teacher patiently teaching the class how to tell time; she listed all the things she was grateful for to prepare herself to die.

The dawn broke and in a dozing exhausted state she continued her list. While family members and very close friends around the country started to board planes to wait in vigil, she continued to stay afloat and continued to list every possible deed, trait, thing she loved and was grateful for: the smell of pine needles in the sun; the sound of snow falling.

Later that afternoon the Coast Guard spotted her, still alive, but exhausted. She had drifted in the ocean for almost twenty-four hours. She was hospitalized and observed for 48 hours before she was allowed to go home. The joy of returning to her family and friends, and to her life felt to her as if she was given a new life for which she was grateful. Since then she has continued making daily lists of gratitude as a way of life.

I wonder if we could learn from Susan's experience. What if our 40 days in the desert this Lent, were modeled on her 20 hour ordeal? As she drifted in the ocean she was viscerally aware of her mortality. And in this awareness she was grateful.

What if instead of rending our hearts this Lent, we looked deeply into our hearts and brought forth all that we love. One by one....each and every day making a list, or somehow keeping track of all that comes to mind that we're grateful for....then, filled with 40 days of gratitude, we may be ready to experience the real joy of Christ's love through His resurrection. And then share that love with each person we encounter. That would make this a Lent of real transformation.