

THE DISCIPLINE OF LENT
Ash Wednesday – Year A – February 9, 2005
The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

When I was growing up, I spent most of my summer on my grandparents farm in north central Pennsylvania. It was hard work, and convinced me that I wasn't called to be a farmer! It was dawn to dusk, six and a half days a week of work. My grandparents raised 16 children, of which my mother was the oldest, and I was the oldest grandchild. I look back on those days and understand that I learned a lot about life in that place.

My grandfather looked like a farmer. He was about five foot ten ... both ways! He had a powerful way of disciplining at the farm. I remember him merely shouting one word, "Hey!" His deep voice would resonate wherever we were ... and everyone would stop and hope it wasn't he or she the target of the shout! My grandmother was four foot four (she always claimed she was four foot five) and built like an ice cream cone! Her style of discipline came with lots of verbal assaults!

I remember one time I tested her. I was about eight, and a bit of a strong willed child (I know that is hard to believe today). I made the mistake of talking back to her. That's right, a big mistake. She went outside and snatched an elderberry switch. She struck me across my backside once, and you would of thought she had murdered me from my shouts!

It's funny though, after all those years, I don't remember the discipline so much as I remember the love. My grandparents didn't have much, but they did provide a warm bed, a hot meal and no questions asked. One my cousins would spend his whole life with them, right up to the time my grandmother died, almost a year ago. They truly cared about everyone in the family.

All this brings me to the word discipline. It's a word that I think has gotten a bad rap. It's a word we need to reclaim in the Church. Maybe the reason it isn't used so much is because of the negative connotations that arise around it. Say the word, discipline, and people think punishment. I think that comes from the mistaken notion that too many Christians have of God. How many of us believe in a mean God, who waits around the corner to do something bad? Then this God jumps out and yells "Gotcha ya!" It's time for punishment. We have the wrong understanding if this is our picture of God. Ours is a loving God. God seeks us out, wishes the best for us, guides us to joy.

It's about time we also understood the nature of discipline. For too long, we have equated discipline with punishment. Discipline actually comes from the word "teaching, instruction." To be a "disciple" is to be a "student, follower." There is nothing here about punishment! It's time we reclaimed the word discipline. After all, we have the best teacher ever ... Jesus Christ. Discipline seeks to draw us into a closer relationship with God. It is life giving. It is a pathway to God.

In the Gospel tonight, Jesus makes reference to three last practiced disciplines: prayer; almsgiving and fasting. Each of these has to do with bringing us into a fuller, deeper, richer relationship with God. Lent is the season of the Church year when we are asked to take a look at our lives. Is God part of it? If not, what has to change in us to bring God back into the picture?

Let's take prayer, for example. Prayer is about our relationship with God. It is through prayer that we foster the connection with the source of love and life. Why ... we even have a book of worship that commends ... daily prayer! Isn't that what the Daily Office is all about? But how many of us take time to pray each day? We live such busy, crazy lives that we don't allow God in. We are obsessed with the culture of 24/7. Maybe we need to take 23/6 and put some prayer in our lives.

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I visited a woman today to take her communion and ashes. She is house bound due to illness. I mentioned a couple of people to keep in her prays. She reached for eight pages of paper (with the names of people who she prays for each day) and quickly jotted down each of the names I mentioned. Now that's a prayer filled woman! It might be easier to just lay there in bed and watch television, or read the newspapers, or do a hundred other things ... but she prays for us every day! Maybe we could find a few minutes to reconnect with God.

Almsgiving is about sharing and service. It is about our relationship with others, especially the poor and needy. Jesus repeatedly spoke about and commanded us to reach out in love, care and concern to the poor. It is not an option. We are the ones who can make a difference in the lives of others. Many of us are not far from being poor ourselves. One missed paycheck, a job lost, or a major illness and we would be in trouble.

This same woman who I visited knows about sharing. I went to minister with her, I left with gifts from her: a sign knitted the year I was ordained; a carved Italian angel; a set of unopened sacred music tapes, and her smile. This is the same person who every time I mention someone in need sends me a check! How often do we pass by those in need? We make excuses of time, of question their motives or doubt their need. How often have we been helped in our lives? We can start by helping one person in need. One at a time, we can make a difference.

Fasting is about our relationship with our self. The discipline came about when ancient people believed that God could only enter into our lives if we make room for God. Fasting is self-denial that tries to clear a place for God to enter in. It is an act of humility. Fasting is the giving up of something that makes room for something even better.

When I see this woman, she is the embodiment of humility. She always tells me how unworthy she is. She doubts that she is giving up enough for our Lord. I am always amazed when she says this. We use Lent to give up chocolates, go on that diet we have always been meaning to do or give up some unhealthy practice. Some of us plan more exercise. All of these are noteworthy and promise a better life, except maybe giving up the chocolate. But are they really about making room for God? What is it that we might need to let go of to make room for God to come into our lives? What one small thing might make an opening big enough for God to be part of us?

Lent is a time for us to be different, act different and live different. We need these disciplines to help us enter into a deeper, richer, more profound spiritual life. Jesus invites us into a new way of being. He challenges the assumptions of our world and says he has the better way. Discipline is not a dirty word. It is a freeing and liberating concept. It is about love and relationship. All discipline needs is us ... and a willingness to connect with God.

May we find our way back to God with the gifts of discipline. God bless us and help us in our Lenten journey.