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Dear Friends in Christ!

We have made it through the first month of 2023! And now this month Lent arrives (Ash Wednesday is Feb 22) and I find myself thinking beyond those resolutions to exercise more or read more and begin wondering what I might give up for this new church season. Of course I've thought of the usual, things, like giving up sugar, or coffee, or fried foods, or perhaps adding a new discipline like starting every morning in 10 minutes of prayer or giving to a special charity, or fasting on Fridays. But none of those seem to excite me or challenge me. Instead, I've decided I am going to start to declutter my life and surroundings so that I am not so distracted from spending time with God throughout the whole year. That is a daunting challenge (if you've seen my garage you would understand!) and no doubt I will encounter roadblocks along the way. But isn't that what happens in life?

We want to follow Jesus more closely and be more effective in our witness, but we get bogged down in all the clutter surrounding us. We start to clean things up or get organized but then we get sidetracked. Perhaps we begin to worry that if we get rid of something, later on we might discover we need it. Or we worry that we might not have enough if we give something away. What is really going on here is that we are placing our trust and security in the stuff that surrounds us. Rather than relying on our Lord to provide, we think we must amass more and more. We become consumed by worry and fear thinking that if we let go of anything we will somehow end up in need and unable to care for ourselves. Yet in Matthew 6:26-30 Jesus says:

*<sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? <sup>27</sup> Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? <sup>28</sup> "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. <sup>29</sup> Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?*

Too often we place our faith not in God's provision but in our own abilities and the stuff we own. We can so easily turn our things into idols and stunt our faith life because we do not trust in the Lord to care for us. This is what leads so many of us to acquire more and more things, to strive for more and more financial security, or to withhold sharing our blessings with others.

So, for me this Lent I am going to commit to clearing away the things that keep me from relying on God's grace, love and forgiveness. It won't be easy, and I may not succeed 100% in these 40 days but it will help me focus more on Jesus. And that, after all is what Lenten disciplines are intended to do in the first place. What about you? Are there areas in your life that draw you away from seeing Jesus and following Him more closely? What might you set aside or remove to see Him more clearly? I challenge you to pray and consider just what Lent might teach you this year and how you can grow in faith during this holy season.

In Christ,

*Pastor Carol*