

THE SERMON

Third Sunday in Lent

Sunday, March 23, 2025

With Our Whole Heart:
Repent

Isaiah 55:1-9 / 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Beloved Church, we continue with the third Lenten sermon of the series, "***With Our Whole Heart,***" an invitation to love God with all our being. When we engage with God in this manner, we open ourselves to transformation, healing, and joy with the One who loves us beyond measure.

If I ask you ***what practices you follow during Lent, what would they be?*** It is almost certain that you are asking yourself right now: *do I follow any practices?*

However, many Christian traditions follow some practices that are often unknown to or not practiced by us United Methodists. For example, Roman Catholic Christians do not eat red meat during Lent but fish. But why do they do this?

As a child, I always heard my Roman Catholic friends say that red meat reminded them of the lacerated body of Christ. Of course, that sounded very disturbing for me to understand. However, the explanation goes far beyond this simple reason given by my friends. So, to understand this tradition, I had to investigate, read, and not just stay with the doubt.

This tradition is based on four principles: The first is **"penance."** Abstinence from red meat is a call to austerity and humility. Because it is a matter of going to the supermarket and realizing the price of red meat. Although this tradition is much older than supermarkets, fish was one of the cheapest products to buy; therefore, consuming it showed one's austerity.

The second reason is to ***"remember the sacrifice of Jesus."*** Good Friday commemorates His death on the cross, so it is accompanied by a sacrifice, such as not eating red meat or poultry, which is a normal a regular part of many people's diet.

The third reason is to ***"Strengthen your faith."*** Christians adopted the fish symbol to represent Jesus Christ, so by eating fish, people remember that faith connection.

The fourth and last one is to "**Support the poor.**" In the past, meat was an expensive food, so fish was an economical alternative.

So, the practice of eating fish instead of red meat during Lent has been maintained throughout the centuries in the Roman Catholic world to observe penance, remember Jesus's sacrifice, and strengthen the connection to the Christian faith.

You may say but this is not our tradition or belief as United Methodists. And yes, I understand that perfectly. But I still ask you: **What makes this tradition followed by more than 1.39 billion Catholics around the world?** Perhaps the clearest answer for me is the search of people for repentance through penitance; because in our humanness, we look for actions that can be tangible; to understand the divine.

So, I ask you again, **what practices do you follow during Lent? What would they be?**

If we pay attention to **Isaiah 55:1-9**, we find ourselves with an invitation into the depths of our souls. We are invited to a set of practices that begin with a time of self-denial, intense introspection, and contemplation. That sounds like Lent, isn't it? - Because Lent calls us to examine our hearts, confront our sins, and repent.

Yet, within the context of this solemnity, we hear the outpouring of God's grace in the words of the prophet Isaiah, who calls us not only to repent but also to feast at the table of the Lord. Did you hear that? – To feast. In the text, God extends a generous invitation, urging us to come, drink, and taste the goodness He freely offers.

That sounds a little bit different from the tradition that I just shared with you, where everything is geared towards a less noisy, calm, and quiet atmosphere. But a feast at the table of the Lord?

The invitation says, ***“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!”*** (Isaiah 55:1). What a beautiful paradox! In a season characterized by fasting and self-denial, we are invited to the feast. God offers us His abundant grace and mercy—not because we have earned it, but because He loves us unconditionally.

In the United Methodist tradition, we understand grace as ***prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying***. Prevenient grace invites us to the table even before we acknowledge our need for it. God says, ***“Come!”*** This is not a mere suggestion but a divine command that transcends our human limitations. In this Lenten season, we must recognize that our thirst and hunger

for righteousness are met not by our efforts but by the overflowing grace of God.

However, this invitation to the table to feast doesn't exclude us from the call to repent. As we come to the waters and partake of the feast, we are reminded that true repentance involves more than mere words. It is a profound turning of our hearts toward God.

The prophet continues, ***"Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?"*** (Isaiah 55:2).

Do you remember that TV ad that said, ***"Snickers really satisfies me?"***? Although I admit that I'm not a big fan of Snickers, I know that many individuals who do like them eat them as a snack in between meals rather than in place of "real food."

What would happen if you were invited to a dinner with friends and all they brought was a Snicker? Would you be happy? I am sure you wouldn't. And you will be waiting for the "real food" to come; to be satisfied.

Sad to say, a "snicker" would make some people happy! We are too quick to settle for instant pleasure instead of enjoying ***"food that satisfies!"***

Like so many people today, the people in Isaiah's time and in Jesus' day were seduced into *"a snicker's bar"*-

food for the moment- Instead of getting the real food; the real "*Bread of Life*" our Lord Jesus Christ; as a priority in our spiritual diet.

Therefore, my friends, the season of Lent challenges us to examine the priorities in our lives; in our spiritual diet.

Are we investing our time, energy, and resources into things that truly nourish our souls? It is easy to become consumed by earthly ambitions, social media, or the persistent pursuit of success. But God calls us to a higher purpose. He invites us to repent with our whole heart—turning not only from our sins but toward Him, who alone can satisfy our deepest needs.

My friends, "repentance" is a transformative process—a turning away from sin and turning toward God. As John Wesley, our spiritual forebear, taught, repentance is not just a one-time event; it is an ongoing journey of grace. It requires us to engage our whole hearts.

Jeremiah 29:13 reminds us, "***You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.***" In this Lenten season, we are called to seek God earnestly, with our whole hearts. This means laying aside our distractions and truly engaging in practices of prayer, fasting, and service. It means being vulnerable before God and allowing the Holy Spirit to search our hearts,

revealing the areas in which we need to repent and grow.

There is a beautiful assurance in this Bible text—God is not waiting to punish us for our transgressions; rather, He is eager to forgive and restore us.

This promise invites us to reflect on the fullness of God's love. While we are called to acknowledge our sins, we are also reminded that God's mercy is abundant. No matter how far we have strayed, God invites us back into a relationship with Him. What a powerful truth to hold onto as we navigate the wilderness of our lives during Lent!

My friends, I encourage each of you to embrace the fullness of this season—not as a time of merely withholding from the world but as an opportunity to feast at God's table. Let us remember that God's grace is available to us, even in our brokenness.

As we engage in practices of repentance—prayer, fasting, and service—let us do so with the understanding that our efforts are a response to God's invitation to come and partake of His goodness. As we seek Him with our whole hearts, God will fill us with His love, His strength, and His joy. **Amen.**