

This is a time of year when many people are eagerly waiting for spring. We get sick of winter; and its cold temperatures and icy roads. We long for warm temperatures so that we can get outside and enjoy the outdoors again. Spring is such a beautiful time of year. We rejoice that the long winter is over and celebrate the growth and renewal of the earth. If any of us were asked to describe spring, we would describe not only the warmer temperatures but also seeing the first robin building its nest or pulling a worm out of the soil. We would describe the buds on the trees as new leaves grow. We would describe the flowers coming and blooming. We would talk about planting our gardens.

A while back, I lived in Eastern Pennsylvania and my sister lived in Rochester, NY. I frequently drove up to visit her and my aunt who also lived in the Rochester area. As I was driving back from visiting my sister one March, I was on a road that took me through a part of the Allegheny national forest and through some farm land as well as through several small towns. As I looked around, I noticed how ugly it was. The grass was a yellowy brown. It was matted down and in many places muddy. The trees were grey and didn't have even a hint of the green that we associate with spring. The little bit of snow that remained by the edges of the road was

brown from all the salt used throughout the winter. My first thought was it's supposed to be spring.

The reality is that this is the time of the year is a time when we get hints of spring with warm days and snow melting. Then a day or two later it is back to cold the pastures and blustery winds. But thinking about it I realized if we think of spring as only time filled with green leaves on the trees and new flowers budding, the grass a healthy green, then we have missed what spring is all about. Spring is about change. It is a season when the many plants which looked so dead come to life again. Trees and flowers grow and their colors become bright and vibrant.

The other day, I was on the internet and was looking at the reformed Churches' website. There, I was found an article about lent. One thing in that article which caught my attention was that it said that the "word Lent is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word for springtime, which is a literal translation of the lengthening of the days." When i looked up what happened when plants with plants in early springs, this is what came up, a passage from the old farmers almanac, in early spring, soil thaws, warms and becomes moist as the snow melts, signaling plant roots to wake up and start absorbing nutrients and water. Increased day light and temperatures activate proteins in plants causing stored energy in the roots to fuel rapid

early foliage growth and flowering often before the last frost. I have thought about that, I have decided that it makes lot of sense and causes me to think a bit differently about Lent. Lent is springtime in our Christian lives.

In the early church, the Lenten period was used as a time for preparing new converts for Baptism on Easter Sunday. But when I was growing up, the main thing that I heard about lent was about what people decided to give up for lent. Throughout the forty days of lent, I would hear, I can't have that or I can't do that because I gave it up for lent. Chocolate or other sweets were often the number one thing that people gave up. I am not sure that the practice had any spiritual meaning for those people. I got the sense that it was simply because that is what they always did.

But Lent is so much more than just giving things up. Lent is a time for preparation, reflection, growth, and change. It is a season when we examine our lives and look to see how we can draw closer to God. How can we deepen our relationship with Christ?

There may be things that get in the way of our relationship with God that we need to give up. We may do things that need to change. But our focus shouldn't be on what we have given up. Rather, it should be on drawing closer to Jesus. Like spring, Lent is a season of growth and change. The view out our window isn't the same when winter turns to spring as it is

when spring changes to summer. Neither should our lives be the same when lent ends as it was when it began.

As Paul says, “You were taught to put away your former self, corrupt, and deluded by its lusts and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in the true righteousness and holiness.” It is a time when we exchange our stealing for honest work, our laziness for action, our rude words for kindness and words that build people up. It is a time when we put away our anger and bitterness; and put on kindness and compassion.

In our passage of 1 Sam today, Samuel is sent to anoint the the next king as Saul no longer listens to God. When Samuel arrives, He asks Jesse to bring each of his sons out. When Samuel sees the oldest of David’s sons who seems to Samuel to be exactly what a king should look like, God reminds him, Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him, for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” A person may seem one way on the outside but be completely different on the inside. God chose the son that everyone least expected the youngest son who tends the sheep.

There are many stories like this today if we look. Sometimes stories about Fr. Gregory Boyle who founded Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. It is an organization whose goal is to help people who have been involved in gangs change and gives them the tools they need to make changes in their lives. In one particular clip, he is telling a story of a time when his Alma mater invited him to speak and asked if he would bring 2 homeboys with him. He talks about picking Mario to go with him on that trip. Mario was talking about, skinny and heavily Tattooed including on his head and face. He talked about how at the airport people would avoid him and pull children away. He also shares that if you walked into homeboy ministries that he is also the kindest.gentlest person at Homeboy industries, even more so than himself. After telling his story, Mario was asked by a woman in the audience what advice would you give to your children, Mario stutters a bit and then blurts out, “I don’t want my kids to turn out to be like me” Silence is in the auditorium until the woman who asked the questions says, “You are Kind. You are loving. You are gentle, you are wise. Why wouldn’t you want your kids to turn out like you?”

Homeboy Industries is a place that takes people that the world sees as useless and hopelessly based on their exteriors - their tattoos, their convictions and time they served in prison, and sees them for who they are

on the inside and gives them a chance to grow and change. It is the spring in the gang members lives.

In the same way, the church is a place where like Homeboy Industries, we are able to be seen for who we are not what we present to the world. It is a place where we have the freedom to grow and change. To become more like Jesus, more like the person we want to be deep down inside. But we don't have to do this blindly or without a guide. We have Jesus as our guide and mentor. Our goal should be to be imitators of God. Just as a small child tries to imitate his or her parents, so we should look to our heavenly Father and seek to imitate him. Look to scripture and learn from Jesus, see how he lived his life. When we do, we find that He lived a life of love, even giving himself up for us, It was a life spent serving God even to death. A life spent reaching out with healing. A life spent in worship and prayer.

In the spring when we plant our gardens we have a variety of different tools. We need to get out our spiritual tools: our bibles, worship, the love of our family and friends, prayer. And use them to cultivate our lives. After studying scripture and using it to examine our lives, we need to see where areas that become dead growth and need to be cleaned up, so that there will be new growth. Then we need to begin the process of changing, that as we

give up or take away unhealthy things that have distracted us from God, we are taking up things which help to lead us closer to God.

This sometimes overwhelms me. How do I do it? How will I know the way? The good news is that we don't have to do this alone. God sent the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name, and who teaches us everything and reminds us of all that Jesus has said to us. God will help us through. He will give us eyes to see the things that we need to change and the strength and courage to make the changes. And when we open ourselves up and prepare the way, then in God, we will grow.

So turn to God, and put your trust and your faith in Jesus. This Lenten season seek God and draw closer to him: through worship and prayer, through becoming God's hands and feet, and serving his people. Seek to grow in Christ, becoming more like him. For spring is here. A season of growth and change.

I am going to close with a prayer taken from Richard Foster's book, *Prayers from the Heart*.

Let us pray:

Spirit of the living God, be the Gardener of my soul. For so long I have been waiting, silent and still – experiencing a winter of the soul. But now in the strong name of Jesus Christ, I dare to ask:

Clear away the dead growth of the past,
Break up the hard clods of custom and routine,
Stir in the rich compost of vision and challenge,

Bury deep in my soul the implanted word,
Cultivate and water and tend my heart,
Until new life buds and opens and flowers.
Amen.