

Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Cycle C)

Lent begins on Wednesday, yes, Ash Wednesday. The Holy Season of Lent, of course, is all about renewal. It's all about conversion. It's all about "turning around," *shub* in Hebrew, *metanoia* in Greek. Yes, the Holy Season of Lent is all about the moral life.

So are you ready? Are you ready for Lent? Now, because of the way some of us were raised, our thoughts go immediately to what we're going to give up. We were taught – many of us, at least – that we have to "give something up" during Lent.

Now, if that's all there is to it, I know what I'm going to do. I'm giving up broccoli. I know, not much of a sacrifice, right? But my chances are good – I think – to maintain my resolve all the way through Lent.

But we know in our hearts that there's more to Lent than just giving something up, don't we? Again, Lent is about conversion. It's about "turning around," *shub*, *metanoia*. And if that's the case, then giving up broccoli is probably not going to get me where I need to go.

So a word about the moral life... Two of our readings this (***evening/morning/afternoon***) employ a metaphor in describing the moral life: a tree. They both note the care and attention that's required for a tree to develop properly over time. In our Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus observes that "*a good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bears good fruit.*" And in our first reading from the Book of Sirach, we're told what's required for a "good tree" to develop as such over time: "*The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had.*" Care, that's what's required.

The same kind of care is required in the development of the moral virtues. You see, virtues are nothing more than good "habits," *habitus* in Latin. And good habits – as we well know – can only be developed over time. The care required in the case of a tree includes water, fertilizer, and timely pruning. In the moral life, the necessary "care" involves the development – over time – of good habits, *habitus*, the development of moral virtue.

Traditionally, the several moral virtues can be organized under four "hinge" or cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude. These are the four virtues we're

challenged to develop as good habits over the next 40 days: prudence in the judgements we make; temperance in the way we live our lives; justice in terms of right relationships, a right relationship with God, a right relationship with ourself, and right relationships with others; and fortitude or courage in the way we live our lives as disciples of Jesus.

Now some of you may be thinking: *“No, Dan. That’s not right. It’s not about the virtues. Lent is about suffering. That’s why we give something up during Lent, something we enjoy.”*

Well, think about it. If you did indeed give up broccoli for Lent – not that I recommend it – only to binge on the green stuff as soon as the Easter Vigil Mass has ended, what good would there be in that? Your “sacrifice” – if you want to call it that – would not have carried over into the Easter Season as a good habit. It would not have carried over into the rest of your life as a moral virtue.

A better example, perhaps... Let’s say that you’ve decided to limit your intake of alcohol. You’re going to “abstain” from alcohol through the duration of the Lenten Season. Why? Perhaps because you’ve found it increasingly difficult to moderate its use over time. Fair enough... And certainly – in this case – some suffering might be involved. But then what happens? You drink yourself silly as soon as Lent ends. Has a good habit – a virtue – truly been developed in this instance? Certainly not.

Virtues – good habits – change us over time. What is difficult becomes easy, but only over time. A new practice – whatever it might be – becomes part of us, part of our DNA, so to speak. It’s the Gospel of *The Karate Kid*: *“Wax on, wax off.”* Yes, the sensei in *The Karate Kid* was very wise, indeed! Practice, practice, practice...

Now apply this understanding of moral virtue to the Holy Season of Lent. As you know, we’re encouraged to think in terms of three broad practices during the Lenten Season: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

If you decided to change your prayer life during Lent, its full development as a moral virtue would imply that the new practice or discipline – whatever it might be – would continue beyond Lent. Suppose, for instance, that you decided to read a selection from the *Word Among Us* – copies of which can be found in the entry way to our church – each and every day during

Lent. Merely “suffering” through this experience would suggest that you’ll drop it as soon as Lent is over. But you could decide, instead, to continue this newly-ingrained practice beyond the Holy Season of Lent. Why? Most likely because it had become a habit, a good habit, a moral virtue. You can no longer imagine *not* praying the readings shared in the *Word Among Us* each and every day.

How about fasting? If you decided to abstain from something – anything, any kind of sin or unhealthy practice, social media, a particular food, whatever – and you reverted back to that practice as soon as Lent ended... Well, there would have been no moral development in this instance. None! Your abstinence would have been little more than an aberration, a bit of “suffering” along the way, but of no long-term consequence. But if it persisted beyond Lent because you could no longer imagine reverting back to your prior behavior... Well, that would be a different matter, wouldn’t it? This new discipline – again, whatever it might be – would reflect moral development. It would reflect a growth in moral virtue.

And how about almsgiving? Here, too, the idea of habit – a good habit, a *habitus*, a new virtue – implies that your newly exhibited generosity would continue into the Easter Season and beyond. If it didn’t, it would, again, be little more than a bit of temporary “suffering.”

A healthy tree... The moral life... They do, in fact, have something in common: the need for development over time. And the result of true conversion, true turning around, true *shub* or *metanoia*? It’s described in the very first psalm. A virtuous person, we’re told, “*is like a tree planted near streams of water. It yields its fruit in season. Its leaves never wither. Whatever this person does prospers.*”

This is our hope for you during this year’s Holy Season of Lent... We wish you a most blessed Lenten journey!