

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
"THREE WAYS TO CELEBRATE LENT"
MARCH 12, 2011
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18
6:00 P.M. Service**

Today is Ash Wednesday, the liturgical season of the church year leading up to Easter. There are many traditions associated with Lent. For example, I hope you had your pancakes yesterday. According to scholars, in the Middle Ages the church forbade eating animal fat during Lent, so the custom arose of using up all the fat in pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. Afterwards everyone joined in games costing a penny or two. The money raised was given to the poor. Shrove Tuesday is also known as Mardi Gras, or “**Fat Tuesday**” as the French call it. Its European celebration featured carnivals which means “**farewell to meat**”.

Lent has traditionally been a time of penitence and self-denial. It is a time of taking stock of our lives. And so we ask the question this evening: What is the proper way to celebrate Lent? Is it to give up chocolate? Is it to spend endless hours on our knees? Is it to wear glum expressions on our face? How shall we celebrate this holy season? Our lesson reading from Matthew gives us an answer.

Jesus says, “*Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*” (NIV) Jesus is cautioning us against public displays of religiosity, but he is also telling us how to celebrate Lent—with “**acts of righteousness.**” What are these acts of righteousness? Well, let's read on: “*So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men.*” So, here is the first act of righteousness: **GIVE TO THE NEEDY.** Not publicly; not with fanfare, but still give.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson once said that we will be measured by how we **“treat those who live in the manger not in the mansion. The blessed of us must save the rest of us.”**

What kind of message do we have for people in need? Many of us have developed hardening of the heart when it comes to giving to the needy. The more we have, the harder it is for us to share. Jesus tells us to do it in secret--not as a show of piety, but still, we are to give. Almsgiving in Jesus' day was a public affair, with Temple officials going around to houses to collect offerings, and people giving public offerings in the synagogues. We are not to make a show of our charity, but we are to give to those less fortunate. The season of Lent would be a good time for us to find someone in need and, without fanfare, share with them. Of course, not all needs are monetary. Sharing with those in need can change your life. An act of righteousness is a good way to begin our celebration of Lent.

THE SECOND WAY IS PRAYER. *“And when you pray,”* says Jesus, *“do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”*

I don't think many of us have to worry about putting on a show with our prayers. In fact, just the opposite is probably true. We probably do not pray enough. And that is sad. Prayer makes a difference. Recent research has shown that people who are prayed for are helped by those prayers even if they do not know someone is praying. Prayer is a fascinating phenomenon.

Prayer is an act of righteousness. Prayer must be an important ingredient of any celebration of Lent. May I suggest that before you leave here tonight, you resolve with God's help to spend a certain amount of time between now and Easter in prayer.

THE FINAL ACT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT JESUS LISTS HERE IS THAT OF FASTING. Jesus says, *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show*

men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

This may be the least appealing act of righteousness to many of us. This notice appeared in their bulletin of the St. Mark Lutheran Church in Springfield, Virginia: **“Tom B. will address Lenten fasts and the practical points of fasting. Linda R. will bring the donuts.”**

The Scripture gives several purposes for fasting. It's part of the discipline of self-control; it's a way of declaring that we depend on God alone and draw all our strength and resources from him; it's a way of focusing totally on God when seeking his guidance and help, and of showing that you really are in earnest in your quest; it's also, at times, an expression of sorrow and deep repentance, something that a person or community will do in order to acknowledge failure before God and seek God's mercy.

Remember, if you love music and decide to miss a concert in order to spend time with God that is fasting. It is helpful to think of the parallel of human friendship. When friends need to be together, they will cancel all other activities in order to make that possible. There's nothing magical about fasting. It's just one way of telling God that your priority at that moment is to be alone with him, sorting out whatever is necessary, and you have canceled the meal, party, concert, or whatever else you had planned to do in order to fulfill that priority.

We are to celebrate this holy season of the year with acts of righteousness: give to the needy, pray, and find some way—whether it is fasting or giving up something that is precious to us—to show that God comes first in our lives. Tonight is the start of Lent. Let us start living during Lent the way Christ wants us live year-round.