

The Journey to Life Eternal
Feb. 26, 2012
Matthew 28: 16-20, Luke 10:25-28

Lent started last Wednesday. I hope you all had a fun Fat Tuesday celebration, because the fun is over now until Easter! And Easter is 6 weeks away!! Oh, just kidding----

It's Lent, and it is a season of reflection, repentance, and renewed commitment to God. It's a time for considering what you believe and why you believe it, for spending time pondering Christ's great love for you and for working on your relationship with Christ.

How has knowing Christ impacted your life? What has God done for you this past year? How can you be more obedient to God? How can you love God better---with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

What does it really mean to love your neighbor as yourself?

We could think about these kinds of questions any time, really, but the season of Lent is a time for us to consider them together, as the Body of Christ.

And so this is the first sermon in a series that will last until Easter. The title of this series is "Living Up to Promises."

I will be talking about our relationship with God and how we can strengthen it. God keeps his promises to us and we can also keep our promises to God. This can be our commitment, our sacrifice, our way of growing closer to God during this holy season of Lent.

Moving through Lent to Easter, we will remember that Jesus' journey to Jerusalem ended on the cross, but the cross was not the end of his journey.

His journey continued on, to resurrection, then to make appearances to his followers, and then on to ascending into heaven.

In fact, Christ's journey has not ended, because he still lives on eternally.

And so our focus through Lent does not end at the cross, either! It carries us on into the future----the future of eternal life with God.

In our scripture reading from the gospel according to Luke this morning, we hear someone asking Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The person asking is described as "an expert in the law."

And Luke tells us that the question was asked not as part of an honest search for understanding, but as a trap for Jesus, asked in the hope that Jesus would give some kind of blasphemous or evil answer and end up convicting himself of some kind of sin.

But Jesus, as Jesus often does, answered that question with a question----"What is written in the Law? How do you

But Jesus tried to take him one step further in his journey toward eternal life. The way that Jesus responded to the expert's answer helped him to apply that answer to his own life, to connect what he knew with his relationship with God!

The expert knew that he should love God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength and his neighbor as himself. And Jesus told him that if he would obey those commands, he would live!

Jesus was guiding him from head knowledge---merely parroting back the correct, scriptural answer----to life application. "DO this and you will live." Don't just know the words. Don't just live in your head. DO this! Take action to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself!

Take those commands to heart! Take them seriously! Take them somewhere! Do something with them!

Live them out! Take action!

It is traditional during Lent to DO something that we don't normally do. We all know about giving up something for Lent, but most of the time that is rather inconsequential. We give up chocolate or red meat or something very physical and external.

Sometimes you hear about people adding something to their daily lives, and some of you have taken home one of the Lenten devotional booklets to add more time with God to your routines. And that's a good thing to do!

Some people know about a triad of things to do during Lent---Fast, give, pray. I have posted a couple of ideas about how to fast, give, and pray on the church's Facebook page, and I will continue to post those throughout Lent.

I have to give credit where credit is due and say that I get most of those ideas from a website called "Busted Halo." You can check it out for yourself if you want to.

Right now I will share just a couple of ways to take action to love God and neighbor in a very real, incarnational way----

You can fast from one or more meals a week and give the money you save on food to a worthy cause, maybe Metro San Diego or Bayside Community Center or UMCOR or some other organization that feeds the hungry or serves people with other kinds of needs.

If you cannot skip meals, try eating more simply and inexpensively and donate whatever money you save that way. Eat less meat and less processed foods.

Give up soda and energy drinks and other expensive drinks like lattes and cappuccinos and donate the money you save to any organization that provides clean drinking water to people in developing nations that have no source of clean water.

Fast from purchasing anything new---no new clothes, no new electronic gadgets, no new housewares or other things that you don't absolutely need right now. Give that money to someone who has no food, or shoes, or a place to sleep that's under a roof.

Give money you've been saving for a rainy day to someone who is having a rainy day now! A homeless family, perhaps. Or a student who cannot afford this semester's books. Or someone who needs a tank of gas to get to work this week.

All of this takes care of the fasting and giving sides of the triad, but we haven't talked about the prayer part yet.

Without prayer we have no relationship with God. Prayer is not just talking to God about what we need and want. God is not Santa Claus or the Easter bunny, and prayer is more than reading off our list of what we want!

But you know that, don't you?

Prayer is also listening to God speak to us, to hear from God what we are called to do with our lives. Prayer is the way we can know on an on-going, continual basis how to follow Jesus!

Prayer is a way of life, not just part of our lives. Prayer is how we know which direction Jesus went so we can follow! Prayer is how we really know God loves us, and prayer is how we know how to live out our love for God.

It's how we stay in and deepen our relationship with God!

Without that relationship, without prayer, we are only dust, and our destiny is to return to dust.

Within that relationship, through prayer, we love God and neighbor, just as God has told us to do! Within that relationship we have eternal life!

I will talk more about prayer next week. As I said, this is the first sermon in a series called "Living Up to Promises."

God has made many promises to us, including the promise of eternal life. We have made promises in return.

Those of you who are members of this church made promises when you joined.

Membership vows in the United Methodist Church include vowing to “uphold it by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service.” We are going to be thinking about how to take that vow very seriously, because vows are serious things! We don’t make vows before God and then forget about them.

We need to live up to those promises, those vows, just as God lives up to the promises he made to us to care for us, to support us, to love and guide us. We could even refer to these promises as a covenant with God, and breaking covenant with God is a sin.

A sin that we want to avoid committing.

There is a fifth act that we should add to our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service.

Our reading from the gospel according to Matthew this morning was the passage that we call “The Great Commission.” Let me read part of it for you again---

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching.

Jesus was talking about witnessing, about giving testimony to the power and glory of God, telling the stories about what Jesus Christ has done for us all and sharing our own personal stories about what God in Jesus Christ has done for each one of us personally.

There may be a problem here. If you are unsure of what God has done for you, maybe you don't feel that you have any stories---any witness--to share with anyone else.

So what I am challenging you to do during this season of Lent is to reflect on your own story of God's love for you. How does God take care of you? How do you see Christ in the eyes of others? How do you know Christ is walking with you on your own journey to life eternal?

And how do you know you are on the right path?

Because without knowing that, you cannot bear witness to others. Without knowing that God's power and grace are real in your own life, without knowing that Christ's love and peace are gifts to you, without knowing the comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit in your life----

You cannot love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and you cannot love your neighbor as yourself.

The journey to life eternal is filled with sacrifice and struggle, but it is lined with grace and love and forgiveness and hope. Let us walk that journey together, learning from each other's stories and upholding each other by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service.

Can I get a witness?

Amen.