

JMJ

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Lent. It's approaching much quicker than I would like. If you're like me, Lent has always been a time where there was a large focus on sacrifice and fasting. When I'd get together with friends, we'd ask each other what we were giving up. If I'm honest, it was often something like snacking, or sugar. Not because we wanted to sacrifice that for the Lord, but because we were secretly hoping to take advantage of this opportunity to shed a few pounds.

As I was reflecting upon Lent this year, I was really struck by the emphasis I notice many people (myself included!) put on fasting. And yet, while I was reflecting on the three aspects of Lent – Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving – I was struck by the order in which they are listed. Maybe its coincidental, maybe it is not. Regardless of this, I wanted to offer another way to approach each of these this Lent.

Prayer. I had someone ask me “There are so many choices of prayers and devotionals to choose from. How do you know which one is right for you?” I would offer that it does not really matter that much. So often I approach prayer with the mindset of “White-knuckling Christianity” (Dr. Mary Healy). I think to myself “I will be holier this season if it's the last thing I do,” but this falls short and misses the mark. Holiness is a gift. I can't grasp it for myself, I can only open it when it is offered to me.

So this Lent, be less concerned with choosing the “right” prayer and be more concerned with commitment. Let's choose something that is manageable and daily, and let us show up to the Lord. Regardless of whether we “feel” any fruit, let us say “Lord, I have committed this time to you, and I am confident that You ‘who has begun the good work in (me) will carry it through to completion” (Philippians 1:6). We might not see the fruit right away, but I promise, a commitment to time with the Lord will ALWAYS bear fruit. My husband and I have been married for almost 15 years and I can promise you hands down that while those moments where we really felt the love and happiness are amazing and absolutely fruitful, our commitment to each other when it was difficult to stay committed are what have born the most fruit, the deeper connections, and a greater intimacy. The same holds true for our relationship with the Lord. It is easy to pray when we feel like praying, but the most fruit will come when we continue to daily pray and turn our hearts to the Lord even we don't feel like we are getting anything out of it.

Fasting. What if instead of just fasting from a food or a comfort, we fasted in a way that would transform our hearts?

What if we fasted from complaining, and when tempted said instead, “God, I trust that you are a good, good Father. I trust that your plans for me are for my joy. I trust that ‘the present burden of my trial is light enough, and will earn for me an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. I will not fix my gaze upon what is seen, but what is unseen.... Because what is unseen lasts forever” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18 – personalization added) “What if you looked for the proof of His love not at the point of your greatest pain, but at the point of His greatest pain?” (Lisa Brenninkmeyer, Grounded in Hope)

If we have children in our home, what if we fasted from saying “in a minute?” What if we prayed that every time we gave our children our full attention, that they would see the love of Jesus in our eyes.

What if we fasted from chewing on the lies the enemy puts in our minds, and replaced it with the truth of our identity as God’s beloved daughter? What if instead of thinking “no one likes me,” we spoke out loud the truth that I am beloved. What if instead of thinking “I’m not enough” we said “I am Daughter, and my Father is all powerful and He holds me securely in His gentle hands. He wipes away every tear from my eyes, and He sustains me, and He is in control of this.” What if instead of thinking we are not beautiful enough, we memorized “You are precious in my eyes and glorious, and I love you” (Isaiah 43.4)

What if we fasted from speaking negatively about our husbands and children? What if we only spoke of them in ways worthy of the dignity of being beloved children of God? What if we saw them, not as the sum of their sins, but rather as the sum of the Father’s love for them? (paraphrasing St. John Paul II). What if we prayed for the grace to see everyone we encountered the way Jesus sees them, that we could imagine ourselves gazing upon them with the same tenderness and compassion that Jesus had as he hung upon the cross?

What if we made our almsgiving this Lent an opportunity for others to see the face and love of God through us?

What if we brought groceries to a family we know is struggling financially? What if we did that anonymously and just had it delivered with zero expectation of a “thank you?”

What if each week we called or visited with someone we know is lonely?

What if we sent a meaningful gift to someone who is depressed?

What if we served our spouse before ourselves when we are really tempted not to?

What if we called our local parish to find out if there are any homebound parishioners and brought them coffee, flowers, the Eucharist? What if we stayed and visited with them?

What if each day we offered our day up for someone else, that all our prayers, works, and joys would be for their spiritual edification? There was a time I offered my Holy Week for a dear friend who was going through a very traumatic season. She didn’t have that many friends who still practiced their faith. That was one of the most difficult Holy Weeks I have ever experienced. As I was reflecting and praying for her, I was pretty certain that she didn’t have that many people lifting her up in prayer and that is why God allowed my week to be more trying. My heart breaks for those who have no one to pray for them. What if we offer our Lent for those who are most in need of God’s healing?

In the past, I usually cannot wait for Lent to end and for Easter to arrive. But what if this Lent, we so allow our hearts to be transformed and we do everything with a firm desire to bring our hearts into union with God’s that it becomes the deepest, most moving season we have yet encountered. What if we pray for the gift of holiness, not something that we can attain on our own, but we ask the Lord to fill us to the extent we are able to receive. Oh my dear sisters, what would happen to our hearts if we do every prayer, every fast, every gift to another out of the firmest of beliefs in our identity as beloved daughter of the most High King.