

Sermon for Lent 4A
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2020
The Rev. Paul LeClair

1 Samuel 16:1-13 Psalm 23 Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

Create in me a clean heart, O God
and renew a right Spirit within me.
Amen.

- Psalm 51

When we began this Lenten season on Ash Wednesday, we considered two kinds of intentions we might make during these 40 days. One was a type of fasting we call ***Giving Up***. This might manifest itself as giving up eating chocolate, not drinking coffee, or the age-old practice of not eating meat on Fridays. The other practice is called simply ***Giving***. Giving donations to Episcopal Relief and Development or making an offering to The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, are how this might look for some of us. Others may give their time to a friend, neighbor or relative who needs help. Others may give their attention by listening to persons who tend to get overlooked in social settings. Scott Stoner, recently offered two more Lenten practices in his blog, *Living Compass*. In addition to ***Giving*** and ***Giving Up***, Scott recommended ***Letting Go*** and ***Holding On***. In his work as a therapist, as a journalist, and in a Lent-themed Facebook page, he became aware of people who were letting go of: The past, especially past regrets
Comparing themselves to others

Procrastination (often caused by perfectionism)

Being judgmental

Anger and resentment and ...

Letting go of trying to be someone they're not

The opposite of letting go is ***Holding On*** .

Holding on to our prior experiences, teaches us the value of certain practices that help us grow in our faith.

Holding on to wisdom empowers us to become more whole as humans who recognize ourselves as children of God.

Holding onto and continuing healthy habits such as daily prayer, physical exercise, consuming a diet rich in protein, fruit and vegetables, and telling our children and spouses that we love them in words and actions, are a few examples.

Recently, because of our concerns about the spread of the COVID-19 Coronavirus, we've needed to ***let go*** of our traditional practice of physically gathering together at church to worship, pray, sing, and socialize with each other.

At the same time, we've also ***held on*** to our desire to stay connected with each other and with God.

We've used our creativity, a gift we've received from the creator, to ***hold on*** to and reach out to our loved ones

by way of phone calls, video chats, email, text messages and other means.

We've connected with the Lord we love, through prayer, meditation, reading, listening to music and a variety of other ways that touch our hearts and lift our spirits.



In our reading from the First Book of Samuel, we learned that both the prophet Samuel and David's father, Jesse, needed to **let go** of the notion that God's choice for King Saul's successor would most likely be Jesse's oldest, biggest or strongest son. Yet, when the shepherd boy, David, was revealed to be the new king, Samuel did **hold on** to the time-honored tradition of anointing David with oil.

In today's Gospel selection, Jesus **gave** his time and attention to a blind man. He mixed the mud and placed it in the man's eyes and gave him instructions of how to wash the mud and to restore his sight. The man in turn needed to **give up** his identity as a blind beggar and he became a brave spokesman who **held on** to the truth of what he had experienced, and he courageously shared that truth with those who questioned him.

The disciples found that it would be best if they **let go** of their thoughts that physical conditions and difficult circumstances must be caused by sin. The Pharisees however were unable to let go of that notion and so, in their own way they became too blind to see the miraculous work that God done thru' the hands of Jesus.



An article in the New York Times illustrated how the Lenten practices of **giving up, giving, letting go, and holding on** can be used in many places at any time.

Newnan is a small city 40 miles southwest of Atlanta. It prides itself on its quiet charm and small-town friendliness. But the good people of Newnan were stunned two years ago when a neo-Nazi group decided to hold a rally against illegal immigration and to protest the removal of Confederate monuments. Although the group preferred to hold their rallies in predominately white towns, as it happened, only a few white nationalists showed up to attend the rally.

That experience, however, did make the residents of Newnan realize how much their little city had changed in the 21st century, and many in the community wanted to embrace that change. So, a year after the fizzled Nazi rally, the town made the decision to display 17 large-scale banner portraits around town. They were images of the ordinary people who make up the city of Newnan.

The banners, now hang from brick buildings around downtown. They include Helen, an African-American woman who for years worked at a sewing factory. There's Jineet, a waitress who arrived in Newnan carrying her dreams and her Mexican traditions; and Wiley, a white factory worker who packed blankets at a local mill until his death in 2017.

Aatika and Zahraw, two sisters born in Georgia of Pakistani parents, are also on display, wearing their hijabs.

The group that commissioned the banners knew that the picture of the two Muslim sisters could be especially controversial, but they refused to pander to irrational fears.

The portraits were meant to be inclusive.

They were intended to upend preconceptions and unravel cocoons people had created within the community.

The portraits did that.

They also exposed old tensions and the suspicions of Newnan's newest citizens.

The portraits, which will hang in Newnan until June, have already had a lasting effect on the town.

They have prompted deep conversations between people who previously had never met.

The pastor of the local Presbyterian church pointed out,

“The truth is, these conversations are hard and uncomfortable and awkward but we need to lean into it.”

A community leader who commissioned the installation agreed.

“People needed to open their eyes and see what a beautiful diverse place we live in.”



Just as the Newnan community came to realize, that the “light of truth” both illuminates and blinds; and that it reveals the love of God in our midst.

That same light, also exposes our un-Christ-like behaviors and attitudes for what they are.

What we see in the light of Christ can be difficult to realize and accept.

Suddenly we **can** see beyond labels and stereotypes.

We can focus outside our self-interest and away from old scores so we can recognize the love of God we may have failed to see or even refused to see.

This Lent may we dare to embrace the light of God in Christ.
May we share a vision of faith that illuminates
the darkness of selfishness and hatred;
and replaces it with the light of justice and compassion. Amen.

Sources:

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Connections, March 2020, MediaWorks, Londonderry, N.H.

Imperfect Union: How 17 Outsize Portraits Rattled a Small Southern Town, by Audra D.S. Burch,
The New York Times, January 19, 2019