

Rutabagas and Parsnips

Sermon by Randy Blasch, Feb. 23, 2020

So, like our story for all this morning, I'm going to start with a question, and show of hands as you are willing and able. Who knows what starts this coming Wednesday? Just a show of hands, don't yell it out yet....

Ok, let me see, a pretty good number of you. Lent, that's right. And now let's be honest with ourselves, who really, really knows what lent is all about? Come on, be honest...

So for those of you who think you might, maybe, possibly know or are not quite sure, or frankly don't have any idea lent is here is the definitive answer and I quote from Dictionary .com ...

“(in the Christian religion) an annual season of fasting and penitence in preparation for Easter, beginning on Ash Wednesday and lasting 40 weekdays to Easter, observed by Roman Catholic, Anglican, and certain other churches.”

If you notice there is no reference there to UUs, But I looked a little deeper and also, it states ORIGIN OF LENT - before 1000; Middle English lente(n), Old English lencten, lengten spring, Lent, literally, lengthening (of daylight hours); cognate with Dutch lente, German Lenz spring. Well that second origin statement does, at least to me, rings a little UU.

But the first one, the “Christian one” is one that I'm actually wanting to draw your attention to. I think there are probably a lot of us in this room who remember lenten rituals. No meat; only fish on Fridays; Fasting. I'm guessing there may even be one or two people in this room who may even make their way to one of the more mainstream churches of our past on this upcoming Wednesday for the implementation of ashes.

But for many of us, it meant giving up something we loved for 6 weeks until Easter. I know in my family and others it was chocolate. No Hershey's or Milky Ways until Easter Sunday when that solid chocolate bunny would appear amongst the nest of plastic grass and chocolate eggs and having not been allowed to eat it for 6 weeks would make it taste that much better. I know some folks who give up coffee, beware interacting with those folks before noon. But it was that giving, up, that sacrifice that was driven into us, we needed to give up something in order to make lent and actually Easter, matter.

My grandfather was a very devout man. He truly lived his faith until the day he died. He cared for those less fortunate, he prayed and was devoted to the Episcopal Church. And every year at lent, for the 40 some years I knew him, he publicly gave up Rutabagas and Parsnips.

Now I am sure there were other things that he privately abstained from for those 40 days, but all I can remember is Rutabagas and Parsnips. Rutabagas and Parsnips? I have to be honest here, it was years actually, well into my late teens, before I really knew what either of them was. They certainly weren't on my radar and certainly not something I would equate with sacrifice.

But what really is lent? I grew up knowing all the stories. I knew about Jesus in the desert, I knew about Palm Sunday and the last supper, and being betrayed by Judas and dying on the cross. Being buried in the tomb and coming back again three days later, seeing his shadow and knowing there would be six more weeks of winter...

wait, I'm sorry, I confused that last part... but seriously, Easter, as a little kid was about finally getting to have that which we were giving up for lent. When I was a little older in Sunday School, we were told it was about how Jesus was tempted by Satan and how he resisted, so we, like Jesus should resist the temptation to sneak a chocolate bar or an M&M, and be like Jesus and whatever you do, don't give in to the devil. So, no pressure there.

So when I found out that my grandfather gave up rutabagas and parsnips, well I saw an out. If he could give up vegetables he didn't like, why couldn't I give up beets, or my mother's meatloaf? Or wait, I could give up watching NFL football for lent!!

But alas, year after year, I gave up chocolate, or candy or went on soup fasts and grandpa gave up Rutabagas and parsnips. The world was unfair. Back in the day when I was an active member in the Episcopal Church, I was known as both a vested and unvested Chalice minister, which means, I assisted in the preparation and distribution of communion, sometimes wearing the frock, sometimes not. I was also charged with going with a Deacon, which is Priest light, to those who couldn't attend service and assist with providing them communion. I was hip deep in it.

So one year when I was acting as vested chalice minister for Ash Wednesday, and a supply priest who was a member of our congregation was presiding over the noon Ash Wednesday service. Father George's message was and I am paraphrasing that maybe instead of just giving something up for lent would should take on something new. After all, he suggested, psychologists have proven that if you do something for 40 days, it will become a habit and you will continue it for the rest of your life.

So, from that moment on, in addition to no chocolate, I started spending those 40 days reading the bible every day, or donating to the poor or exercising, and every year, right after Easter it would rain, so I didn't want to run, or the next verses in the bible were boring so I could wait a day or two before reading them and eventually never go back, and the poor, well, there's no excuse why I quit helping them, but every year, Easter would come with ham and lamb, roasted garlic potatoes and chocolate bunnies and robins' eggs and I'd quit doing that thing that would surely become a habit and partake of that which I had been denying myself.

And then brothers and sisters, something happened that surely would save me. I had an epiphany, a religious moment if you will when I stood at the altar of my church and realized I didn't really believe a word of anything I had been saying for most of my life, and so, I left the Episcopal Church, and as the story goes, eventually, some 20 years ago, ended up here and became a UU and the need to give up chocolate or taking on a new task was gone forever.

I didn't even need to give up Rutabagas and parsnips. I was saved. Hallalujia!!

But I have a confession to make, something was missing, it was just too easy. Even though my understanding of Jesus and my faith formation had fundamentally changed, something was definitely missing but it couldn't be lent for heaven's sake, could it?. I mean, I know that giving these things up all those years never, not one time brought me closer to god. I know that even though I tried, none of the things I tried to take on, ever really made the world a better place.

And even though the story of Jesus in the desert really became just that to me, a story, something was just not right. Why in the world should lent even matter to us?

I mean in the first place, it doesn't make sense chronologically. It is supposed to represent Jesus' 40 days in the desert leading up to holy week and ending with Easter, but the timing is all off. This desert exile thing took place before Jesus even started his ministry, not the 40 days before he was arrested, crucified, and all that.

And to be honest, why should it matter to us UU's that he wandered around the desert playing hide and seek with satan? I mean really, as bible stories go, let's face it, it's not even a particularly good one.

And why 40 days? I mean if you look into it, the number 40 comes up a bunch of times in the bible. Moses wandered in the desert for 40 years. Noah floated around in that big ole boat for 40 days and night before they found land, and while there are volumes written about the numerical significance of 40, I personally think folks at the council of Nicea just got lazy and settled on 40.

So feeling like Lent really has no significant religious relevance, and frankly makes no sense, it's no wonder we just tossed it aside and, well, honestly, ignore it.

So when Dave asked me if I would speak today, the last Sunday before lent, did I have anything meaningful to connect this made up holiday to us. Or wait, it's a test for the seminary student.

You see, whether you care or believe in Easter or not, there is something here for us and it's about back sacrifice and change. Not I'm not for one moment going to suggest we give up Chocolate or Coffee or gluten free, vegan, organically grown kale chips. That sacrifice frankly doesn't matter and as Ghandi says "Sacrifice that causes pain is no sacrifice at all. True sacrifice is joy-giving and uplifting"

So how can we find a sacrifice that is "joy giving" and would actually, possibly, maybe make a difference in the world? Well, what if we chose to sacrifice, oh I don't know, hate.

Now I can imagine what some are thinking, we are UUs, we don't hate, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being regardless of who they are. Et cetera, et cetera. We don't hate, do we? When I first arrived at Meadville in August for orientation, we were asked what we thought our roles would be as religious leaders and we had to tell everyone.

My answer was, and I know you're dying to hear it, was I see my role as a mirror to my congregation, to hold it up and help us see ourselves for who we really are. And it's a special mirror because not only will you see your individual reflection when it's held up, but we'll see the re-election of the entire congregation.

So folks if you honestly look in that mirror, as I am right now, you know, you just know, that we, yes we, can and do hate. There are some of us who might feel hate for those who may sit on the other side of the political aisle from us. Hate for those who make policies restricting, for example, the reproductive rights of women in the name of pro life while ignoring the healthcare of those who have debilitating diseases and whose lives are being adversely affected by bad policies in this and other states.

Or what about hate for those who will bad mouth a person whose gender identification may not be something they understand. Hate for those who live in poverty and whose skin color may not be ours. Hate for those who spew their own hateful speech in the name of God and Jesus. Be honest, can you see it?

So, knowing this, is that something you can and more importantly, are willing to put aside for the next 40 days? If the answer is yes, what might it look like? Well, are you willing to stop sitting idly by when you hear someone make a so called joke that specifically pokes fun at a person or group and then, rather making a spectacle of the joke and the one who told it, speak privately and listen to that person so they understand why it's hurtful and not appropriate? And hear their story.

Are you willing to say something when someone disparages a member of the LGBTQ community and respond in a way that is loving and instructional rather than in anger? Are we willing to explain to someone who goes off on those who are undocumented in this country with statements of truth, remembering that the person who is making those comments is just parroting what they have heard by those they have chosen to trust. What are you willing to do? We have the opportunity, over the next 40 days and the 40 days after that and the 40 days after that, to actually LIVE what we hold as our values, our principles our MISSION. To Nurture our Spirit; To Strive for Justice and To Transform the World? What are you willing to do?

You have a choice this Lenten season, a choice to make a change in how you interact with the world and those who think differently than you. A choice to make a difference for those who are being discriminated against or marginalized by those who would keep them down out of pure ignorance. A choice to stand with those who others stand against, you have a choice, we have a choice.

Or you can just give up Rutabagas and Parsnips. Either, way the choice is ours to make.