

Community Church of Issaquah
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Looking Inward, Praying Outward
Rev. Vincent Lachina

When I first moved to the Seattle area years ago, I remember having a conversation with someone who was born and raised here about this thing called ‘rain.’ I had never been in a place where there was such a long period of grey skies, clouds and rain. When I asked the friend about that this is what I was told: “You can expect the rainy season to begin the third week of the Washington State Fair and last until Easter. You might have one or two days of a short break in that time, but don’t expect many.” Ever since then, I have dreaded the end of the Puyallup Fair and can’t wait for Easter. Even now I have a mixed feeling of anticipation for the end of Lent and the celebration of Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus. On the one hand, I can hardly wait for Spring with sun, tulips, and so much more. On the other hand, I want to make every day of the Lenten Season meaningful and reflective.

During the forty days (plus 6 Sundays) of Lent, Christians are urged to spend personal time reflecting on our lives and trying to bring ourselves to a place where we feel in the best relationship with God. Trust me, I know. That is not an easy thing to do. Each morning when I sit in a quiet place and time seeking to feel the presence of the Lord, I take my prayer book with the names of those who have asked for prayerful support and I try to spend time with each one. There are times when the list is short and my meditative time doesn’t last that long, and there are times when the list is long and if I give adequate time to each person or group, I may be in prayer for quite a while.

Like most people, I find it much easier to pray for someone else rather than myself. Most days, my name isn't on the list of those seeking prayer support. But during Lent, we must remind ourselves of the very purpose of this time is to focus on ourselves. That isn't a selfish thing, it's an essential thing. The three main areas of our lives that we will focus on during this Lenten Season are prayer, fasting – or giving up something in order to reduce distractions so that we can focus more on God—and giving or being charitable.

One response I get when interacting with an individual that always makes me smile is when I say, "Let's talk about you," and the reactions is, "Oh no, let's don't talk about me." We tend to want to divert the conversation away from ourselves and move it toward someone else or something else. Have you ever imagined how you would react to some of the teachings of Jesus if you were there when he spoke? Try this one as written in the book of Matthew:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food and the body more important than clothes? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"

But we do worry and often about the most insignificant things.

During this prayerful Lent, each of us should devote some time each day for spiritual self-care. Can you find a few minutes each day to focus on you? Are you willing to spend some time each day in prayer for yourself, asking God's attention on you? When we address our own prayer time and our inner beings, the aim of Lent is to fix what is broken. All of us have things in our lives for which we need to repent. Some things are small, "I wish I had been nice to that person instead of grumpy." Some are neither small or large, but still important, "I need to pay more attention to my loved one and let them know that I do love

them. “ And some are big things for which we need to repent, “The things I said about that person were filled with hate and I am so sorry.”

We are called to repent, to express our apologies to the Lord and seek His forgiveness. In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet wrote some wise words of advice for us to follow even today.

“If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me says the Lord; if you utter worthy, not worthless words, you will be my spokesperson.”

So, what’s the purpose of repentance? Is it to clean our slate and see ourselves as righteous again? Is it to make up for what wrongs we might have done? Or is it to receive God’s forgiveness?

Those questions are answered for us in the Scriptures. In the Gospel of Mark, we are told, *“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. And when you stand praying if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”* Repentance on our part is to correct the conflicts we have with others so that the Lord can correct our hearts. What if we spend some time quietly asking God to show us if we are holding anything against someone so that we can forgive that person so that God can offer forgiveness to us.

And where does forgiveness come from? It goes like this: in the old Jewish tradition, there was and still is a day each year in which believers are called to examine their lives and seek forgiveness. During the times of the Old Testament, in order to receive God’s forgiveness there had to be a sacrifice of a lamb so that the blood of the animal would wash away those sins. Today, our Jewish friends observe a day called Yom Kippur when they must “make right” the things and people they might have offended during the past year. What we see in Lent and Easter is a fulfillment of that tradition.

God allowed his son Jesus to serve as the sacrificial lamb whose blood would cleanse and offer forgiveness of our past sins. If you recall when we observe Communion or the Lord's Supper, we take the wine that represents the blood of Christ that was shed for our sins so that we might experience God's forgiveness. This is the core of Lent for Christians. We day by day work on our own lives to lead us to the day we will observe the crucifixion of Christ whose blood was shed in this death.

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, *"In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."* That's the underlying message of these days as we prepare and anticipate the death but resurrection of Jesus. We want to inventory our own lives in order to cleanse ourselves of transgressions and sins so that in our confession we not only receive God's forgiveness but also his grace. Grace is God's gift to us though we might not even deserve it. God gives it because of his undying and unconditional love for each of us. The Lord simply wants all of us to be in the right relationship with him.

I'm not in a place where I can force you to spend time each day in prayer for yourself. Truthfully, I could never force you to do anything, and that's not my role as your pastor. What I want for each of you is that you will simply think about dedicating a few minutes each day examining your own life to see if there are things there that you want to bring to God and say, "I'm sorry, God. Please forgive me." And then experience the lifting of the burden of sin or transgression from your heart so that you experience the total joy of being in the best relationship with the Lord.

Four days of the 40 days of Lent are behind us, and perhaps you haven't taken the time to just reflect on your life. Maybe in your prayer time

you lifted up several other friends and loved ones who have some special needs. That's evidence of your faith in Christ and your love for those the Lord has placed in your life. So let me ask you, how much of your prayer time was devoted to you and your own needs? Have you spent any time with personal confession and receiving forgiveness?

As you may know, I was born into an Italian Catholic family. My grandfather, Papa, was the patriarch of the family and ruled with a firm hand. At his instruction, since I was the first-born male child, I must be dedicated to be a priest. In following that dictate, I was sent to Catholic School while my siblings could go to public school. I was a difficult student. I hated that we couldn't eat breakfast before we went to mass to receive communion, so as a hungry kid I often refused to kneel down through the whole service. When I got to class, Sister Mary Margaret would whack my hand or send me to the coat closet. It was a miracle I passed the first grade.

But there was one thing about the Catholic faith that I could never comply with – well, many things, but the biggest hurdle was confession. There you'd go into that dark little confession booth and a voice on the other side of the wall would ask if I had anything to confess. I disliked this so much I would most often make up things to confess just to see how many Hail Mary's I would have to pray (which I never did). I'd say things like, "I stole a quarter from my mama's pocketbook." That would never happen by the way because I knew what my mom would do if I ever even thought of such a thing. I just could never get into that confession of my sins so that a human being could tell me how to get forgiveness.

That was one of the major factors of my leaving the Catholic Church, must to my Papa's anger. But I never gave up my calling to be a priest. It just transformed into a Baptist minister. For me, there is no human

being who has the power to forgive me. Only God can do that, and during this Lenten Season, I will personally spend time each day seeking God's love for me that causes me to see where I need to cleanse my heart and experience that grace we talked about earlier.

Likely, your life is undoubtedly busy and it might be hard to deliberately make yourself park for a while and focus only on yourself. There are so many aspects in all our lives that distract us from personal inventory and contemplation, but I want to encourage you to give more thought to this as we all move through these days of Lenten focus on prayer. Since I can't be in your home with you to assist you in this important observance, I'd like for all of us – each of us – to take just a few minutes now to turn our eyes inward and prayerfully seek God's guidance and His loving awareness of our needs in seeking his forgiveness. And perhaps as we reflect on his forgiveness, we might reflect also on offering forgiveness to those who might have hurt or offended us at some point in our lives.

Let's all close our eyes and sit in silent prayer that focuses only on yourself. Ask God to reveal what you need to take care of during our preparation for his death and his resurrection as a sacrifice for our sins. Let's pray.