

**WHAT WILL YOU GIVE UP FOR LENT?**  
**Sermon for Ash Wednesday**  
LPC, 2/25/09

You all wouldn't be here in the middle of the day on Ash Wednesday unless you were intentional Christians of some sort. For intentional Christians, a focus for serious thought on Ash Wednesday is what sort of Lenten discipline you will take on. More commonly, the question is phrased, "What will you give up this Lent?" This question actually came up last night in the convivial discussion around the Mardi Gras table.

Chances are you have already made some decisions about your Lenten discipline, but if it is not too late, I would like to offer my two cents on giving up stuff for Lent. My main thought is simply this: in considering a Lenten discipline, whether it is taking on something new or giving up something old, let it be something that matters to God.

This does not mean that a Lenten discipline needs to be great and important in the eyes of the world. Letting your Lenten discipline matter to God means more about a person's motivation and attitude than it does about the thing itself.

Let's take the example of giving up the consumption of alcohol for Lent. This would mean something different for an active alcoholic than for a person who enjoys a tiny glass of sherry before bed. It would mean a lot to God for an active alcoholic to give up booze. God desires people to be whole and to honor themselves and their relationships. These are things that alcohol prevents an alcoholic from doing. Any effort to disrupt the destructive cycle of alcoholism is something that God is deeply concerned about.

Will that alcoholic be able to stretch that Lenten abstinence into the beginning of a lifetime recovery, something that would really matter to God? A lot will depend on how much that alcoholic is willing to take herself out of the equation and let God effect healing.

Now, let's turn to the person who enjoys a sherry before bed. Does it really matter to God if that person denies himself a pleasure that in his case, not being an alcoholic, is pretty harmless? Maybe yes, maybe no. If the person merely feels deprived and distressed by giving up the sherry, God is probably not interested. But if something else happens, God will probably pay attention. This is how that might work.

The person begins his nightly bedtime ritual and reaches for the sherry bottle, then checks himself and says a prayer, "God, I thank you that I have the luxury of deciding whether or not to have a sherry. Tonight I pray for those who do not have enough water to drink, never mind other beverages. Help me to see how I might serve those in want and give me the strength to offer that service wholeheartedly. Amen." I think God would listen to that prayer.

The interesting thing is that the alcoholic on her way to recovery and the innocent sherry drinker who turns privation into prayer have something in common. They are stepping back from their natural appetites and letting God accomplish some healing, either in themselves, or somewhere else in the world. This would be the case if someone gave up their daily Starbucks coffee and sent the money to build a well in Africa, where such a thing is desperately needed.

Step back and let God do some healing. That is the point of Lent, not how dramatic you can be in your Lenten discipline.

This Lent, let your Lenten discipline matter to God. Step back and let God do some healing.