

“Be a Persistentist ... Stand Firm”

The journey towards Easter is along the path called Lent. Last Sunday we began that journey following Jesus to Jerusalem toward his appointed time. Taking the path of Lent helps us to arrive at Easter prepared to hear the good news that “Christ is risen!” Lent is an opportunity ... a time of returning to God ... the God who loves us more than we can imagine. Lent is a time to come home to God ... a time to let go of the old ... a time to let the past die ... as well as a time to let go of those things in our life that prevent us from having the life we want and need. Lent is a time to seek a closer relationship with God by giving up old habits or tendencies that hinder us from a closer walk with Jesus.

We are challenged during Lent to surrender those negative aspects of our life that draw us away from God. Last week’s gospel lesson was about Jesus’ survival experience in the wilderness. Jesus battled successfully against the opportunity to become a popular miracle-working messiah. He faced the three temptations that pinpoint the human element of sin: materialism ... power ... security. Jesus came away from the experience unscathed, because he realized that in this life “to have it all” and “to do it all” means paying the heavy price of self-destructive consequences. In reality, our material wealth, our status, and our sense of security are illusions the world puts in front of us in order to shield us from God. Living for self-glorification means ruin; living for the glory of God means life.

This morning we will examine another form of negativity that draws us away from God. The Apostle Paul addresses the church at Philippi regarding an issue that has to do with personal conduct ... specifically with the attitude toward and use of the physical body. Apparently, there were a number of Christians in the first church who thought that all they had to do was believe; that the internal spirit was enough for salvation, and that they could disregard external behavior. They thought that since only the soul goes to heaven and the body stays here and turns to dust, what one does with the body is not important. They thought they could eat and drink and party-hardy all day long without affecting the soul.

They thought they could absorb the world without affecting the soul; that body and soul were literally two separate entities and had nothing to do with each other. In verse 19, Paul refers to the Philippians’ great appetite for everything in life as “... their god is their belly.” Paul may have borrowed this thought from the Greek dramatist, Euripides, who wrote, *Wealth is god for men of sense ... My god’s my belly*. Whether Paul’s thought is original or not, the verse is aimed at those Christians at Philippi who imagined that the body and its appetites were irrelevant to the condition of the soul. The Philippians had cast off restraint and played fast-and-loose with the claims of morality on the ground of their being enlightened as “men of the Spirit.” Paul criticizes this thinking and his stern message to them is that ... body and spirit are not separate entities but interrelated.

It seems that the word for *belly* is equivalent to the word for *flesh*. Clearly Paul uses the term “belly” to refer to a combination of excessive indulgence and a lack of self-denial. To Paul, the cross of Jesus means self-denial, and the enemies of that cross are those who believe in self-indulgence. No true followers of the cross of Jesus can make a god of “their belly.” Watch how people live, Paul says. See if they can recognize their own shame. Then you will know whether they are enemies of the cross or not.

There is a familiar Latin principle: *reductio ad absurdum*. It means that arguments carried to their logical conclusion will result in absurdity. This same principle applies to life. Anything good, pushed far enough and long enough will ... in the end ... deteriorate. This is especially true of the human physical appetite. One of the strong themes of Lent is self-denial ... curbing the negative, destructive habits of over-indulgence. Lent is a time of self-reflection, a time for increasing awareness that we are responsible for our spiritual, physical, and mental well-being. Lent is a time to think seriously about “moderation” ... moderating our excessive appetites, in order that they do not interfere or deter our attention given to worshipping and obeying God. We may eat and drink and enjoy life, but be wary of that life created by God.

An armed robber accosted a French priest on a dark, back street in Paris and demanded his wallet. As the priest opened his coat to reach for his wallet, the thief caught sight of his clerical collar, and immediately apologized. “Never mind, Father, I didn’t realize you were a priest. I’ll be on my way.” The priest was relieved, of course, and good-naturedly offered the man a cigar. “No, thank you, Father,” the robber said, “I gave up smoking for Lent.”

Like the “religious” robber, many people have a lame view of what Lent is about. Some believe Lent is a season of minor inconveniences; for example --- giving up candy, coffee or tobacco for 40 days. Small sacrifices are made, as are small

jokes about the whole affair. If we make a joke out of Lent's call for self-denial, we are missing one of the primary principles of life: the principle of renunciation. Lent reminds us of life's fundamental trade-offs: the things of the spirit in exchange for the things of the flesh ... the bread of heaven for the "fast-foods" of this world.

The Greek philosopher Plato compared human ways upon this earth in a story about a carriage drawn by a pair of young and spirited steeds. In the vehicle, the driver holds the reins and guides the horses on the straight and smooth road. One day a heavy drowsiness comes upon the driver and he falls fast asleep. The horses, not feeling the restraint of the reins, go off the right path, and soon they are bouncing over bush and brush, to the edge of a deep pit, a bottomless abyss. A man standing nearby, seeing the threatened danger, calls out to the driver in a loud and mighty voice: "Wake up! Save yourself!"

With a start, the driver suddenly awakens. In a moment he realizes his peril. Pale and trembling, he hastily grasps the reins, and, exerting almost superhuman effort, he succeeds in swerving the horses to one side, thus saving his own life and those of his animals. Plato says the moral of the story is this: the fiery steeds are the appetites, desires, lusts, and passions to which the heart of the human inclines from youth. The driver is the wisdom, understanding, and intelligence with which God has endowed human life that we might rule over our appetites and desires and have dominion over our self-destructive impulses. Lent is our wake-up call to implement God's wisdom over the appetites of the body that affect our spirit and have become a detriment to our relationship with God.

We live in a society, in an area, where affluence and excess is the norm. In fact, we are so consumer-oriented that we spend our money compulsively on things we don't need, but want. It is as if growing up we felt deprived, and we are now living to make up for it by refusing to deny ourselves anything, in order to overcome our sense of deprivation. We have difficulty distinguishing between being satisfied and being satiated. Both words satisfied and satiated come from the same Latin root *satis* meaning enough.

To be satisfied means our needs, expectations, wishes, or desires have been fulfilled, and we are free from doubt or anxiety. To be satiated means to be provided with more than enough to the point of weary or disgust; it is fullness to the point of excess. To be satisfied is to eat one ice cream cone. To be satiated is to eat five. As absurd as that illustration is, think about how you live your life ... think about your daily activities: satisfied / satiated ... moderation / excess ... contented / anxious ... enough / more ... happy / unhappy.

There is an interesting sidelight to this word "satis." This Latin root also yields the word "sad." Isn't that the emotion we ultimately experience when we labor under the belief that we are mortals that require more and more to be satisfied? Sadness is the end result of uncurbed appetites when we place a greater value on acquiring more and more, instead of valuing what we have now.

Paul's warning to the Philippians is our challenge this Lent. We are to focus more on spiritual matters than physical desires. We are to think more about the cross of Christ and what that cross means to us rather than the excessive appetites of today's life style. Lent is a time to take stock of our life and strive towards being satisfied, contented, and happy by taking up the discipline of diverting our attention away from desires that are excessive towards those activities that bring us closer to God.

Paul's mantra of encouragement was his words "stand firm" ... stand consistently firm in the faith. It's hard. One struggling person wrote, "I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist; I am a persistantist." People of faith in any age are to be persistent in their faith despite the ups and downs of life. One model could very well be John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. Here are his words from his diary, a lesson in persistence: Sunday, AM, May 5 – Preached in St Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore. Sunday PM – Preached in St. John's. Deacons said, "Get out and stay out." Sunday AM, May 12 – Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there either. Sunday AM, May 19 – Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I could not return. Sunday PM – Preached on street. Kicked off street. Sunday AM, May 26 – Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service. Sunday AM, June 2 – Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway. Sunday Afternoon – Preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me.

You and I are indebted to many people in our life who persistently did not give up on us. And as a church, we are indebted to those faithful men and women who over 130 years persistently stood firm in their faith through thick and thin to keep the doors of this church open. Thank God for the persistantists. Now it is our time to model the faith particularly to children. This Lent stand firm in your faith and be yourself a persistantist Amen!