

Lent 2
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Giving Up

I came home a couple of weeks ago and Karisse was watching a ventriloquist on TV. Karisse has a dummy and has worked with her in the past, so this was interesting. He was good; his dummy seemed to act alive, and as long as you watched the dummy, you didn't see what was really going on. But the illusion depended on what you didn't focus on. If you watched his lips, you could see them move ever so slightly. To enjoy the show, you had to choose to watch the dummy, which means you chose NOT to watch the man himself.

Last week I suggested that instead of giving up something for Lent, or taking on something, that you focus. What I didn't tell you is that focus always means giving up something. You give up what you choose not to focus on. The spiritual discipline of giving up, the apophatic way, as it is called, is a key ingredient in the church's tradition of Lent, and it is an essential part of spiritual growth, no matter who you are.

Nicodemus is forced to give up some stuff that he has held rather precious. It always intrigues me that he comes to Jesus with obvious questions, but he doesn't start with a question. He starts with a statement of something he believes. "You must be from God, because otherwise you couldn't do the signs we see you doing." Notice that his criterion for identification of the work of God is signs and wonders. One might assume that he is thinking along these lines: God is beyond all and can do what God wants, so, when things happen we can't explain, God must have shown up. Each culture has its way of deciding when important stuff is going on.

Jesus doesn't answer his statement. He redirects his attention. No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born from above. Now there is a nice little play on words here in the Greek. The word for "above" can also mean "again." Perhaps both meanings are at play here: not just born again, or born from above, but born again from above. Either way, nobody chooses when they are born physically. In the same way, though we make choices, God gives rebirth from above, and that doesn't come at our bidding.

Nicodemus, you're looking in the wrong place. You're looking for signs, YOUR criteria for the appearance of the divine, but God shows up when and how God shows up. Those who are reborn from above know they have received a gift. They are like the wind, that comes from somewhere or other and goes somewhere or other. Even with all the sophisticated prognostication devices we have today, the only guarantee about the wind is to go out and feel it. And if you go outside, you have chosen to leave inside behind. In the same way, if you choose to open yourself to God's movement, you choose to set aside your own agendas for God.

Rebirth from above is a divine gift of a new perspective on what is important. All of a sudden, the previous stuff, the signs and wonders, and all our pompous pronouncements drift from focus. We must give them up. It's the only way forward.

And so, the discipline of Lent is that of giving up.

It has been argued that marginalized people have already been forced to give up too much, therefore, for the church to ask them to give up more is complicity with oppression. Whereas marginalized people have indeed been forced to give up far too much, this Lenten discipline of giving up is not at all about forcing anything on anybody. Everyone must give up what they do not focus on, and if it is going to be a spiritual discipline, it must be done freely.

In El Salvador, I sat with a cooperative of women called Manos Unidas. They have all been forced by human violence to give up enormously. They have lost homes. They have lost family members. They have lost businesses. They have lost roots. But somehow in their lostness, they found one another. One of them knew of Cristosal, and reached out for help. Cristosal began helping them organize, to focus their attention on what helped them move forward. It called for a lot of conversations, a lot of emotional healing, and a lot of building of relationships with people they initially did not know. Then, for those who wanted/needed it, seed capital was given to begin micro-businesses.

Now, almost a year later, they have given up a lot. They gave up their sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. They gave up their feelings of victimhood. They gave up what had lay at the core of their hearts for far too long, and in the space created by giving up, they are being reborn from above.

Last week I asked you what your focus would be during Lent. If you decided to think about this, maybe you found it hard. After all, you can't focus on everything; you must choose. And so, I ask you once more as I did last week. What is important? What is not? What is essential and what is not? Do not be afraid to focus. Let go of what does not fit with your focus. Open the space once occupied by the unimportant. It is into this space that God breathes rebirth from above.