



Beyond Giving Up Chocolate: Going Deeper in Lent

From the time we were children, our first question for Lent was often, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Giving something up for these 40 days is a custom that, when we were younger, helped us enter into the season with a sense of purpose and a greater awareness. Answer: Chocolate!

As adults, we might want to consider looking at Lent in a deeper way. We are probably much more settled into our behaviors and patterns of life and sometimes giving up something is where we begin -- and end -- our reflections on Lent. It can be tempting to say “I am giving up chocolate” or beer or even all sweets and all alcohol. But without more reflection, it can become simply a way I show God how strong I am. It is more about me than any conversation with God.

Lent isn't simply about us “giving up” something. The real grace is when we recognize that Lent is a season in which God wants to give us something. God wants to help us transform our lives and make us freer as people -- not just freer with God, but in the way we live our lives and love our families.

It is much easier for us to simply choose something to give up -- then we can dismiss Lent! “I am giving up TV for Lent.” “I am giving up movies... Snacks... Soda pop.” We give it up and exercise our willpower for 40 days to prove to ourselves and to God that we can do it. And at the end of Lent we can return to what we gave up.

But this year we might reflect and ask the deeper question: What is God inviting me to change this Lent? How do I know what God might be stirring in me? I begin by listening to the movements in my heart. Where am I feeling uncomfortable with the choices I am making? With the things I have done? With the habitual ways I respond? The Lord will be speaking to me in those small nagging moments of discomfort in my heart.

Asking what we would like to change about ourselves this Lent requires a little reflection. What pattern of behavior in my life needs changing? What do I need more of in my life? Patience? Unselfishness? Understanding?

But each of us can think of something that gets in the way of our being loving and self-sacrificing. Too often the ordinary conflicts, divisions and difficulties in our family life result from simple selfishness on my part. I choose to fight. I choose to defend my opinion. I choose to use things I know about my partner, my children, my parents against them. I choose to hurt them.

The results of that behavior are never good and always divisive. We can imagine a Lenten practice in which each of us would tell members of our family – those whom we have most offended in these ways -- that we are sorry and ask them to help us to work with us to bring more unity and peace to our family life.

We can ask: What would it cost me to change this behavior? What would it mean if I didn't walk around my family acting crabby all the time? What if I decided to be much more loving and patient with my spouse this Lent? What if I did decide to "give up" something really destructive in my life? As I reflect, I might realize that changing a particular way I live is coming to me as a call from God and I don't have to do it alone. God is moving my heart to reflect on these changes and God will remain faithful and help me to stay open to the grace being offered to me for change.

I need help. It may be something that I don't want to change or acknowledge. I don't think I can change it. But that's where talking to God can make the difference. I am not doing this alone; I am doing it with God.

In asking God for help, we might ponder one of the many healing gospels, like Mark 2: 1-12. In this story, a group of friends carried a mat with a paralyzed man to Jesus, who was teaching inside a house. So many people crowded around the outside of the house that the friends were unable to get the mat inside. So they went up to the roof and moved aside the tiles and lowered their friend on the mat to Jesus below. The words to this gospel say that the friends on the roof had "broken through" the tiles to lower their friend into the house for healing. Their breakthrough led directly to the healing.

Where do we need a breakthrough? What is the barrier that keeps us from asking for healing? In our own lives, we need to break through our denials, defensiveness and our unwillingness to look at ourselves. Discovering what the barrier is in my life is critical. If we don't know what the barrier is, these weeks of Lent are a great time to reflect upon it. When we identify the barrier, we have made the breakthrough. That's when Jesus can heal us of it.

Why is this a good Lenten penance? Because it gets my attention where I live every day. It allows God's grace into my soul and into the place where my real life exists. That's where Jesus stands with me every day, waiting for me to be lowered from the roof so he can touch me and heal me.

**Taken from Creighton University

Choosing Lent, Acting Lent, Praying Lent

Symbols in Our Home

We need to choose to let our homes be a place full of the holy – things that help raise our minds and hearts to God. Our world is full of so many images that lure our minds and hearts elsewhere. Here are some symbols that will carry the ongoing meaning we give them, for us and for our families and loved ones.

A Crucifix

We probably all have a crucifix in our home. If not, Lent might be a wonderful time to buy one and place it in a central place. Even a child's drawing of Jesus' death for us can be a powerful, stirring reminder of God's love.

Water

A simple bowl of water, in a central place, can be transformed into an ongoing reminder of our journey to the font of baptism for the renewal of commitment and life in Christ. Perhaps we can pray over it. "Lord, may this water remind us of our baptism and be a blessing for our home, where our dying and rising in you is lived each day. Bless us, as we sign ourselves with it each day."

Sand

Perhaps a bowl of sand can help us remember our journey. God led the people in their journey in the desert. Jesus himself reenacted that journey to face his own temptations. The desert can be a place of retreat, where there is a freedom from distractions. It can be a good place to be led and to face our temptations.

A Candle

Imagine having a candle in a central place in our home. Imagine praying over it together as we begin Lent. "Lord thank you for the gift of your Light in the midst of all darkness. Let this candle be a symbol of our faith in your presence among us." And imagine if we light this candle whenever we feel tempted away from the Light of Jesus, when we are experiencing tensions in our home, whenever we need special graces. Imagine how powerful experiencing the lighting of the New Fire will be at the Easter Vigil.

Perhaps we have Baptismal candles that were given to us or our children at Baptism. It might be very meaningful to bring them out and lay them near our central candle. We can remember the words that were spoken when we received this candle: "Receive the Light of Christ. ... Keep this flame burning brightly."

Perhaps we have the white baptismal garments that have been used in our family for baptism. These could be taken out. We can remember the words, "See in the white garments you wear, the outward sign of your Christian dignity. Bring this garment unstained to the joys of everlasting life." We can let it remind us of our white garment, when we see the newly baptized come out of the font of baptism, and be given their new white garments. It is a symbol of the priesthood in Jesus that we all share.

A Bible

The Word is so important for us during Lent. Perhaps the prominent presence of a Bible in our home can represent for us our desire for God's Word in our lives. Imagine the experience that could be ours if - when we feel a new inspiration or a softening of our heart or just a sense of God's love - we pick up that Bible and simply, reverently kiss it.