

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

The First Sunday in Lent, February 26, 2023

Psalm 133:1, Hebrews 10:24-25; Colossians 3:13-14

What God Wants Us to Give Up: Egocentricity by Rev. Sue Trigger

Psalm 133:1

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

Hebrews 10:24–25

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Colossians 3:13–14

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

I have noticed that in regions where the Roman Catholic church is the dominant Christian church, the practices of the season of Lent influence the larger community. That influence was especially obvious with the youth of the church we were serving. Without encouragement from our Presbyterian church, the youth believed that they were supposed to give up something for Lent. Every year it was a topic of conversation. “I’m giving up chocolate; I’m giving up social media; I’m giving up soda.” While I appreciated the desire to keep a discipline during Lent, I always felt that giving up chocolate and social media during Lent were not the most nurturing ways to experience the season.

Lent is meant to be a time of a deeper self-reflection. The season was built upon the story of Jesus’ time in the wilderness when he faced great temptation in preparation for his ministry. As the video noted, Lent is a practice of preparation which includes prayer, fasting and giving. It’s a time when we intentionally focus on our sinful behavior, as we think of the sinful behavior that caused Jesus’ suffering. The purpose of self-reflection is personal

transformation, so that when we come to Easter, our celebration will be filled with deep gratitude and joy and a renewed commitment to become the people God wants us to be.

During our worship this Lent, we are going to consider the question, “What would God want us to give up for Lent?”

Now that I have told you that Lent is a time to focus on yourself, I am going to talk about the problem of egocentrism. Enjoy the irony. But egocentrism and faith have become a topic of much conversation in recent years. Dr. George Simon, a clinical psychologist, author and speaker, who specializes in problem characters¹ wrote, “Egocentricity and entitlement go hand in hand. They’re natural characteristics to possess early in life. But as we mature, especially as we develop in character, we hopefully outgrow these tendencies. Most of us come to appreciate that there’s a vast world outside ourselves. And we come to appreciate that we have a relationship with that world. How we structure that relationship largely defines our character. And healthy character begins with the realization that as much as a part of us might want it to be otherwise, life is definitely *not* all about us.

Coming to appreciate that it’s not all about us is just the beginning. Growing in character also demands that we come to appreciate all that we have, especially the *gift* of life itself. Now, this can be a most daunting challenge for some. Abuse, neglect, trauma, etc., are far too prevalent realities for too many of us growing up. And when that happens, life doesn’t seem like much of a wondrous gift. It can be difficult to feel grateful for much. Simon says that is why it behooves us all to work to alleviate suffering. Grateful people are naturally generous. And they build vibrant, cohesive communities. Everyone benefits when our environments are free from egocentricity and entitlement.”

I don’t know that Dr. Simon intended to make a case for Jesus, but he certainly did a good job of it. His steps to a healthy, balanced ego sound like they came right out of the gospels.

1. Appreciate the gift of life and be grateful.
2. Grateful people are naturally generous.
3. Grateful people build vibrant, cohesive communities.
4. Work to alleviate suffering in the

¹ Simon, George, Egocentricity and Entitlement Define Disordered Characters, <https://www.drgeorgesimon.com/egocentricity-and-entitlement-define-disordered-characters/> July 6, 2022.

world. 5. Everyone benefits when our environments are free from egocentricity and entitlement.

Simon argues that egocentrism and entitlement are so prevalent in our society that infantile attitudes are being reinforced and character is lacking. “What’s different about the world today is that we’ve largely lost a sense of what matters most to our welfare: *character*. We don’t really expect it anymore, and we don’t devote the time, energy, and attention to developing it that we have in times past. And we’re paying a very dear price for this. Still, we keep placing our faith in what hasn’t – and in what truly *cannot* – solve our social and relational ills. We stubbornly believe the answers lie in power, punishment, rules, structure, etc. But history also attests to the fact that our steadfast allegiance to these things has gotten us nowhere” And as usual, the culprit is malformed *ego* – vain, prideful, stubborn, faithless ego. Trusting in the power of character development – beginning with our own – can truly change the world.

Until I read this article by Dr. Simon, I wouldn’t have described the gospel as a guide to character development, but it is. Jesus taught all the things Simon suggests are needed to build character in our disordered world. He taught his followers to have gratitude, to work to alleviate suffering, to build vibrant, cohesive communities and he told them that everyone would benefit if they did as he taught. It is interesting that Simon noted that sages, like Jesus, have tried to teach us a better way, but we haven’t listened. Our egocentrism has gotten in the way.

We all deal with some degree of egocentrism. It’s easy to see it in the way we deal with people we disagree with. One of the reasons our nation is so badly divided is because of what is called the **false consensus effect**. The false consensus effect is when we overestimate how much other people share our perspective or preferences. We tend to think that others agree with us or see things our way. Our ego likes to find those who think like we do and can easily assume that those who don’t agree are wrong and worthy of our condemnation.

The false consensus effect is particularly prevalent in Christian communities. We assume that others share our beliefs, and if they don’t, we reject them as wrong. Egocentrism is what

motivates some people to determine what should and should not be addressed in the church based on their personal preferences rather than the teachings of the Church or the Bible. King Henry the VIII is a great example of egocentrism driving the king to manipulate the church so he didn't have to be accountable to anyone for his divorces. Egocentrism has led to some of the ugliest acts in history; the holocaust, the crusades, and the crucifixion of Jesus are good examples of egocentrism and faith blending in a harmful way.

We all have an egocentric slant to some degree and we can all benefit from softening our egocentric edge. Yes, being self-focused can be a benefit when we are trying to stick to our values or when we are feeling disrespected. It can be a benefit when we are self-focused in order to develop our character. However, when an egocentric mindset begins to negatively impact our everyday behavior it can cause problems. There are helpful ways to become less egocentric:

- **Slow down.** Sometimes we make decisions based out of fear. Fear likes to pressure us and force us to think in a very "[flight or fight](#)" way, even when we are not in the presence of danger. Slowing down can help you clarify what it is that needs to be decided, considering how your decision may impact those around you.
- **Look around.** We like to think that life is all about us. There are people around us who care and want to be a part of our lives and decision-making. Look around and see who is standing by you and willing to help. Considering the needs and perspectives of other people can also help reduce egocentrism.
- **Take a chance.** Sometimes people become more egocentric because they have learned through experience that they cannot trust others to be there for them. As you look around and notice who is standing by you, take a chance to let someone show you what they can do. Not only are you practicing walking through your fears but allowing someone who cares about you to get close.
- **Stay present.** Just as some egocentric people have learned to not trust others, some have learned to never show vulnerability. Even if you make a decision and someone notices a misstep, keep moving. All of us want to live well and it never feels comfortable when

others see our mistakes. Staying present allows you to practice navigating uncomfortable situations, learning that you can move through them and still be okay.²

Our scripture lessons this morning give us some Biblical instruction that remind us that faith is not all about us individually and can help move us away from our egocentrism. The bible tells us to live together in unity, provoke one another to love and do good deeds, encourage one another, bear with one another, forgive each other. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. There's no room for egocentrism in these teachings.

As you think about what God would want you to give up for Lent, consider your egocentricities. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you see yourself honestly and transform you into the loving person God created you to be. The practices of Lent are not easy if we take them seriously, but they can be life changing. May we all find new life as we take this journey of reflection together.

² Clarke, Jodi LCP/MHSP, What It Means to be Egocentric, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-egocentric-4164279>, April 6, 2021.