

**Seventh Sunday *per annum***  
**Year C, 2025**

1 Sam 26

1 Cor 15:45-49

Ps 103

Lk 6:27-38

*Preparing for Lent*

With Lent only a week and half away, it's time to ready ourselves for that holy season of the year. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These are the traditional penitential practices of Lent, meant to discipline our wills, deepen our repentance, and express love for God and neighbor.

Today's gospel provides a good starting point for us to reflect on how we might incorporate prayer, fasting, and almsgiving into our Lenten penances.

Let's start with prayer. For many people, taking on some additional personal prayer obligation forms part of their Lent. And so they pray the Stations of the Cross on the Fridays of Lent, as we do here at St Patrick's, each Lenten Friday, beginning at 7:05 a.m. before daily Mass. Others resolve to attend daily Mass during Lent, on select days or even every day. These are noble and worthy undertakings.

But the words of the Lord Jesus in the gospel might point us to another way of praying during Lent: *"love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."* It's so easy to be good to those who are good to us. But to be good toward those who are our enemies, to be good toward those whom we dislike, disdain, despise ... that is something that makes

for a penitential, sacrificial love. It costs me to pray for my enemies. I have to pay, even painfully, from my reserve of ego, self-righteousness, pride. And as these are emptied out by praying for, blessing, doing good to, and loving my “enemies” ... I make myself vulnerable, open and susceptible to being wounded, like Jesus on the cross, who prayed: “Father, forgive them, for they know now what they do.”

So here’s the challenge. Think of your enemy. Call to mind your foe, your opponent. Remember those who have wronged you, crossed you: former friends, family members, exes; business rivals, political opponents; anonymous people who were rude or indifferent to you, who cut you off in traffic ... and pray for them. Bring their faces before your mind’s eye and desire their healing, their blessing, their peace and reconciliation. Ask God to make them whole, to show them his mercy and love, to make them prosper, to bring them closer to him. From your heart, want for them all that is best and beautiful, all that is peace and joy. That’s no easy task. It will make you uncomfortable, and you’ll want it done and over soon and quick. But the more you stick with it, the more you will burn through that heavy burden of ego, pride, and self-righteousness that serves no purpose but to hold you back and weigh you down.

And then, if you’re up for a real challenge, do the same for people *you’ve* wronged. Bring to mind the people who have had to bear the brunt end of *your* selfishness, of *your* harsh words, of *your* being a jerk. Pray for those whom you have cursed and reviled, whom you

have hated, whom you have mistreated in word and deed, whom you have held as an enemy, even if you don't know them and they don't know you. *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."*

When it comes to almsgiving, Lent is the perfect time to give alms to the poor and the needy. If you come to Mass on Ash Wednesday, there is an opportunity to give to the poor through the Ash Wednesday collection which is dedicated to Catholic Charities of Acadiana. Those funds are distributed throughout Acadiana to help the poor and the needy. So on Ash Wednesday be sure to bring some cash or a check with you. Give generously to the poor: what you do for these least, you do for the Lord.

In the gospel, though, the Lord's words challenge us to make almsgiving more than a one-off deed, but a constant disposition of mind and desire of heart: *"give to everyone who asks of you."* Everyone, not just those whom we vet as "worthy" of our gift. Everyone who asks of me, I will give to them. I'll be honest with you, there are many times in the past where I've walked away from an encounter with the poor or from someone who was asking something of me ashamed of myself and embarrassed. I was in a hurry, or had no money on me, or some other excuse ... usually a lame excuse, a lie really ... because I didn't want to be inconvenienced, bothered, because I didn't want to deal with the person in front of me. But I've changed my attitude and my approach. I don't do this anymore.

When asked, I give. Always. If I have my wallet within reach, which I almost always do. When asked, I now give.

So here's the challenge that I present to you, one that responds to and respects the words of Jesus to *give to everyone who asks of you*, without exemption or exception. Right now, how much cash do you have in your wallet? Make sure that you dedicate some of it to the poor, right here and now. Twenty dollars, forty, fifty, a hundred. Say to yourself, "this is not mine, this is theirs, and whenever someone asks me, all I have to do is give them what is theirs, what belongs to them. This cash, I'm just holding it for them. Ask me and you will receive." Now you have no excuse. Now you're ready. Ask me. I have it. I'm ready and willing to give it.

And make sure that you *always* have that same reserve. I will always and every day have twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred-dollar cash reserve in my wallet for anyone who asks. Let's be honest, we're not asked everyday, or even all that often, so we can and must be generous any time we're asked. We must have the disposition of mind and the desire of heart to respond promptly, willingly, and generously whenever we're asked. Knowing that I'm holding some unknown poor person's cash in my wallet makes me ready to *give to everyone who asks of me*. For each ask, I give all that I have reserved. All of it, generously, graciously, without expectation of repayment or trying to place conditions, for God has shown himself kind to me and by his grace I have so much, so very much, when others have

so little. In this small way, I, too, can *be merciful, just as my Father in heaven is merciful.*

Now of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, the only one not mentioned in today's gospel is fasting. So let's review what the Church requires of us Catholics when it comes to fasting and abstinence during Lent. From age fourteen onward, no meat on Ash Wednesday and on Fridays of Lent. That's clear enough. This is the discipline of *abstinence*. We *abstain* from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and Lenten Fridays.

Now concerning *fasting*, this is required on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fasting means eating no more than one ordinary meal and two smaller "bites" that together do not equal an ordinary full meal. On fast days, we should feel hunger, since we're not eating the ordinary amount. This binds Catholics from eighteen until fifty-nine. So if you're not yet eighteen or if you're sixty years old or older, you're welcome to observe the fast if you wish, but you have no obligation to do so.

But let's go deeper. As I said, there is no word of Jesus in today's gospel to challenge us more on this particular point, so, instead, I'll offer the challenge. It's commonly heard in south Louisiana that giving up meat on Fridays in Lent is no big penance, since we have such wonderful seafood ready to hand: shrimp, crawfish, oysters, fish of every kind and variety in abundance and delicious.

It can feel like we're respecting the letter of the law on abstinence, while violating its spirit, though. For those of us sensitive to this – and we should be – keep in mind that while we may not eat meat, we are not *required* to eat seafood. In fact – I will be bold enough to say it – we shouldn't. Abstinence on Lenten Fridays should extend to all animal-foods. That would be a worthy and (just slightly) challenging spiritual undertaking. Lenten Fridays with breads and bean dishes, with a *gumbo z'herbes* and vegetable stews. There's no end to hardy and delicious vegetarian dishes that we can eat in place of seafood.

If I were pope, I'd make this the new rule for Lenten abstinence for the whole Church. This would be my spiritual rationale for vegetarian Lenten Fridays: Jesus died on a Friday; therefore, I will not eat of any animal, however small or insignificant, on a Friday of Lent. No animal will die that I may live. The death of Jesus alone suffices for my life.

There is a strong connection to be made here even to the holy Eucharist. To represent, and to sacramentally contain and be his flesh and his blood, Jesus chose plant-foods: bread and wine. These plant-foods are the flesh and blood of Jesus. It is a mystery of faith.

So when it comes to “giving up something during Lent,” we can surely give up sweets, or chocolate, or coffee, or alcohol, or whatever we've done in the past. But if you're looking for something with a greater theological and biblical resonance, you may wish to consider something along the lines of not eating

animals or animal products. Not just meatless Fridays, but vegetarian Fridays. And maybe you extend that to another day or two of the week.

Some people are finding interest in the “Daniel fast,” taken from the first book of Daniel, where young Daniel and his three young companions, faithful Hebrews, are to be fed from the table of the Babylonian king. Daniel, though, does not want to violate the Law and eat unclean things, so he convinces the king’s steward to feed him and his companions only water and vegetables for ten days, and if they don’t look hale and healthy after ten days, then they will give in. All agree, and after ten days of vegetables and water, Daniel and his companions look healthier and stronger than any of the other servants, and so they continue their diet, enter the service of the Babylonian king, and above all remain faithful to the Law.

There are all sorts of variants of the Daniel fast, but at its base: no alcohol, no animal products. This can be done for ten days straight, or for ten or so select days in Lent (like Tuesdays and Fridays), for all of Lent, whatever you want. This is a challenging and spiritually unique practice, and one that will make you reach out for new vegetarian recipes that can be fun to prepare and just might become family favorites, since they can be filling and delicious.

At daily Mass in the past two weeks we have read from the book of Genesis, where, I pointed out, in the creation story, before the Fall, God gave Adam and Eve to eat only of the plants in the garden of paradise. It was only after the Fall, indeed, after the flood, that God

gave the human race to eat also of the animals. The theological significance of this is that before the Fall, before sin, there was no killing, no shedding of blood, so that man could eat. Only after the Fall did we kill to eat.

So in Lent, as we build up to the Good Friday death of Jesus on the cross, we can, even by our eating, strive to recall the primordial innocence of all creation – when no creature died so that we might eat and live – and we can look forward to the new creation in the kingdom of God, when our original innocence will be restored and renewed.

So with Lent only ten days away, I encourage you to plan your Lenten practices now – prayer, fasting, almsgiving – so that through them you open your heart to the working of the Holy Spirit, who renews those who seek the Lord and his merciful love and prepares them for the great reward of truly being children of the Most High God. Amen.