

Mel approached me to give a sermon in preparation for Lent. Unfortunately, I'm going to be away for the next two weeks, so you're getting this sermon a bit early, but at least it may help you to start thinking about how you want to 'do Lent' this year, if you intend to observe it in some way.

The title for this sermon, listed on the MFM website, is "Spiritual Disciplines." Anyone who is familiar with my life on facebook will seriously question whether I'm the right person to give a talk on anything resembling "discipline." I post commentaries on my day when I am supposed to be working. I post pictures of failed baked goods I tried to make ... when I was supposed to be working. I talk about how much I yearn to drink entire jars of maple syrup. I express irritation at mailboxes being located too far away from my office.

But, in spite of all this, I did live in a contemplative monastery for 14 months, so I guess I should have something to say about spiritual discipline.

I went to live in this contemplative monastery, for those who aren't aware, as an anthropologist conducting field research. So I was entering into a situation that I knew had little resemblance to my daily life.

I often compare the experience of living in a monastery to the movie *Groundhog Day*. In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray is a cantankerous news anchor required to go to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to report on whether Phil, the town's celebrated meteorologist groundhog, sees his shadow. Bill Murray's character is living selfishly and out of harmony with the other people in his life. He gets through his irritating day of reporting, relieved that it is over, only to wake up the next morning to discover the exact same sequence of events replays itself. Groundhog Day happens again. And then it happens again. And again. Bill Murray experiments with different approaches to this infinity of Groundhog Days, growing increasingly frustrated, until finally he lets go, learns to relax into the repetition, and to use it as an opportunity to start helping others and putting as much love as possible into the world. Once he learns to do this extremely well, finally, Bill Murray wakes up and it's February 3rd.

Apologies for the spoiler, but monastic life is like this. Eating more or less the same things at the same strictly scheduled times each day, repeating many of the same words in church for hours each day, seeing the same 13 sisters all the time, the predictability of the work schedule, the repetition of the 11 day Psalm cycle, and the yearly liturgical calendar, could drive one crazy. Or one can relax into it, and start waking up each day fresh and grateful for another opportunity to try again, asking God's help to love God and other people more today than you did the day before.

There is even an idea in monastic life, like in *Groundhog Day*, that when you finally get this right – when you finally learn to love as much as you possibly can – then God will allow you to go home. This is their explanation for why some saints died very young.

Every part of your day is understood to be something that you can offer to God, whether you are actively praying or saying Psalms in church, shoveling manure, baking bread, folding laundry, eating or sleeping.

I am not sure how much of an idea I can give you of this, in a short time frame, without seeming to emphasize the difficulty and asceticism of the schedule. I don't really want to do that. One of the early writers on monasticism, John Cassian, reported a conversation with an Egyptian desert monk, who recommended that monks should actually lie about their fasting, to help keep themselves humble and to ensure they weren't doing it for human acclamation. This is in accordance with the Gospel passage from today, which recommends disguising and concealing your spiritual practices so that you can be sure you are doing these in order to cultivate your own relationship with God, rather than for the sake of helping you obtain human praise.

St Jerome, an extremely influential and theologian from the 4th century – someone who, by the way, thought fasting was a very important practice - says the following: "If you have fasted for two days, do not think yourself better than one who has not fasted. You fast and are peevish; the other eats and is pleasant. You work off your irritability and hunger by quarreling; the other eats moderately and gives thanks to God."

God is not in the details. "Whatever you do, do it with love" the prioress said to the community at the start of my first Lent in the monastery.

Most of us have more than enough temptations in life to deal with. Life itself presents us with lots of times when it is challenging to love God and our neighbour. We don't really need the extra temptations created by fasting.

What I see is important about spiritual discipline, is just the attempt to clear out the clutter, to make life less stimulating and distracting, and to deliberately offer all parts of your day to God.

And because of this, I have a couple of warnings:

First, fasting, or abstaining from certain foods, won't necessarily help you to cut down on distractions and to offer yourself to God. Especially for people who are aware of their own struggles with body image, restricting your diet can be an incredible distraction, can fill you with self-elation when you succeed and extreme shame when you fail. These things are not from God, who loves us no matter what we eat. If we fast with this attitude, I think we'll be driven away from God rather than learning to depend on Him and to be grateful for the good things in life. If any practice you adopt becomes just part of your quest for self-perfection, what you are doing is not helping you spiritually and may actually be doing a great deal of harm to yourself and those around you. Watch out for this.

Second, whatever you decide to do for Lent, I think it is important not to allow it to unduly inconvenience other people. Love comes first – it is for the sake of becoming more capable of love, remember, that you are undertaking these practices in the first place. If someone invites you over to dinner and offers you meat, not knowing you have given up meat for Lent, it is probably a greater act of charity to eat it without saying anything about your own practices than to abstain from it because you gave it up for Lent. This is a choice each person has to make for herself, based on her own conscience, but my own take is that it's important to be flexible when love requires it. Jesus was always reminding the Pharisees about this – "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill

and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others" (Matt. 23:23).

So what to do for Lent... I would say, start by thinking of Lent positively. Think about how you can grow closer to God, rather than thinking primarily about Lent in terms of what you want to give up.

I would recommend establishing a routine, if you don't already have one. Budget appropriate amounts of time for sleep and eating and praying. Your work life probably runs on a schedule, and these other things are more important than work to your mental and spiritual health, but yet we always seem to let them slide and we only give them whatever time is available, after we've done everything else we have to do.

Myself, leaving the monastery, it became a vital need for me to set up a regular practice of prayer. This took time to develop on my own, without the common rhythm of the community, but now it anchors my day, gives it structure and meaning, and it gives me the opportunity to spend time with God, to reflect with gratitude on the good things in my life, to remember to pray for others who need assistance, and to reflect on things I should have done with more love and care.

Setting times for this and adhering to them, will help you to naturally and joyfully make certain kinds of renunciations. If you know this practice is important to you, you will switch off the tv or the computer when it's time to start your evening prayers. It will become a habit to respect the alarm when it goes off early so you can get up to pray before work or school. And sometimes other people will help you out. These days, if I don't get up for prayer immediately when my alarm goes off, Liz's cat Leo starts scratching and yowling at my door insisting that I start my morning prayers. During that time I become his captive dispenser of belly-rubs and he has started to look forward to it.

Speaking of 'being flexible' about your practices, I've decided that love requires me to let the cat share my prayer time.

If you are looking to make a renunciation, of the traditional, "giving something up for Lent" variety, I would say give up whatever unnecessarily complicates your day. Give up whatever good, but unnecessary, things might be preventing you from keeping regular hours of prayer. Maybe look at your guilty pleasures and addictions, or ask yourself: if I could spend fourteen months in a monastery, what would I be RELIEVED to leave behind? I don't mean you should stop going to work, but I mean maybe let go of those things you do compulsively, even though you know they're not especially satisfying.

Shopping might be your thing. Online shopping can be a real addiction for some people. – something you do compulsively even though you don't need to do it and even though it doesn't make your life any better. If that's your addiction, maybe it's time for a "buy nothing" Lent. But – and I think this is important - don't become less charitable or stop giving to the poor because you've decided not to spend money during Lent. That's counter-productive.

Myself, I need to give up facebook for Lent, because it is one place I am tempted to linger rather than starting my evening prayers, for instance. It is not something that I think contributes to my capacity to

love others. I don't find it especially satisfying, and in fact it can sometimes fill me with self-pity, comparing my life to those of others in my age group.

But this will be different for each person.

If you are inclined to do a food-related fast and don't think you are prone to mixing up your renunciation with a program of self-improvement or weight loss, then I would recommend making a choice that seems, for you, to be directly tied to an attempt to love other people. You could choose to only purchase and eat fairly traded products. If you aren't already required to eat on a welfare budget for financial reasons, you could try to eat on a welfare budget so you can understand what that's like. I know one friend and former member of this congregation tried to eat only rice and beans for Lent one year, to help her develop empathy with the majority of the world who eats these as staples every day.

Myself, many of my food practices now are ways of reminding me of this second home I have in the monastery. I have kept up some of their ways of eating because it calls to mind this time in my life when all parts of my day were dedicated to God.

These practices would not have that value for someone who hasn't learned to love life in that context, so I wouldn't recommend them to others. But maybe there's something you always ate on certain days when you were growing up. Like maybe you always ate spaghetti on Wednesdays. Maybe doing that again would call to mind for you the love of your family. That might be a good thing to bring back during this season.

In short, I'd say do what helps you cultivate love and gratitude and helps you draw closer to God. Anything else may be a "discipline," but it is probably not a "spiritual discipline."

And now, as the nuns would say, I wish you a happy Lent!

