



Lenten

Reflection Series

One Church, Many Voices

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Fifth Sunday of Lent - March 21

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Having been raised Catholic, and having attended Catholic school from kindergarten through college, I have always been keenly aware of the presence of Lent. Growing up, Lent meant 40 days free of diet coke and social media; it meant it was almost my birthday, a day on which I assumed God would give me a free pass to break my Lenten sacrifice; it meant kicking myself every Friday when I inevitably forgot that I wasn't supposed to eat meat after I finished my cheeseburger. While I always felt the presence of Lent, it wasn't until I got older and began actively exploring my faith for the first time that I began to understand the purpose of Lent. When I was asked to share this reflection, I was suddenly unsure if I had ever known the purpose of Lent, but sitting in personal prayer and reflection for a while gave me some confidence and provided me with some new thoughts that I am happy to be sharing with you today.

Over the past two years, I have had the privilege of working at St. Stephen's Youth Programs in Boston's South End as a member of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. The mission of the organization is to promote equity in education, opportunity, and employment for young people and their families; as a result, I have had the opportunity to build strong relationships with many young people of all ages, but I have particularly worked with students ranging from 1st to 3rd grade. At the start of my second year at St. Stephen's, I began working as the Christian Education Coordinator, planning and facilitating virtual Sunday school classes for the children of the congregation as well as weekly spiritual health lessons for the youth who attend our after school program. Creating faith-based programming for the youngest congregants was as straightforward as expected. Teaching spirituality to the after school students, however, proved to be more of a puzzle. Religion is not a required component in our youth programs and many students are either not Christian or not religious at all, making spirituality a challenging and unfamiliar topic. Luckily, I have been blessed with a decade of Jesuit education that helped me frame spirituality in a new way. Our lessons focused on three questions essential to Ignatian spirituality: Who am I? Whose am I? Who am I called to be? My goal was to teach the young people how to explore their own identities and the communities they were a part of in order to grow into the "best" version of themselves—in Catholic terms, the version of themselves God is calling them to be.

With each lesson, I challenged the students to ask our three key questions in order to grow into that version of themselves, the one that would change the world for the better which is, spoiler alert, that same “best” version of themselves.

Our lessons were, unsurprisingly, cut short in November when COVID cases spiked in Boston. We had to shut down in-person after school programming indefinitely while at the same time opening our doors to students during school hours who had nobody at home to help them with their virtual schooling. It seems everywhere you look, someone is making the argument that one group of people has suffered more from the pandemic than another; while I’m not in the business of ranking the difficulty of anyone’s experiences, I will say I have seen more taken from the young students I work with for reasons they are still struggling to comprehend than I could ever imagine myself handling when I was their age. Inexplicably, they maintain a joyful, energetic attitude, a sense of incredible teamwork, and seemingly boundless perseverance. Since opening our in-person program back up on March 1st, I have had the joy of reconnecting with many students whom I had either only seen virtually or had not seen at all since early November. Upon reflecting on my experiences and the season of Lent, I realized the parallels between the emotions I was experiencing having jumped back into such rewarding relationships and the season of Lent itself. The 40 days of Lent challenge us to contemplate Jesus’s ultimate sacrifice: giving up his life for our sins. In doing so, we are called to act more christ-like in our own lives, a call synonymous to that essential Ignatian question, who am I called to be? Being more christ-like can mean being more pious, denying yourself worldly desires (i.e. diet coke and social media) in order to focus on your relationship with God, or spending more time in silent, personal reflection. While all these are absolutely christ-like characteristics, working with some of the most amazing young people I have ever known during these exceedingly trying moments has helped me to see the often somber season of Lent in a new way. My students have reminded me that being christ-like also means being more child-like; that is, seeing and engaging the world with the boundless love, unconditional acceptance, fierce and often counter-cultural independence, and awe-inspiring resilience shared by both children and Jesus. After all, is that not the promise of Easter? The knowledge that despite the darkness and despair surrounding us, despite the death, misfortune, persecution, or pandemics that we encounter here on Earth, life and love and joy will always overcome it all. In putting our faith in God, we are trusting that God will lead us not only into paradise in the next life but guide us through the trials we face in this one. In living in the model of Jesus, that is, in striving to become the person God is calling us to be, God keeps that promise of Easter through and within us not only during Lent, but every day of our lives.

Personal Reflection Questions

Lent is a time of self-examination and renewal. Consider using the reflection prompts below to help further your contemplation and open your mind and heart during the 40-day journey of Lent.

- **What do you think the purpose of Lent is?**
- **Who are you called to be?**
- **Who are you? Whose are you? Who are you called to be?**