

Rev. Paul Nesbit, First Congregational Church, Westfield MA, 2/18/24

### Preparing for Lent/Preparing for Love

Where or what is your dream vacation? Some people like to travel to a spot where they haven't been and take in all the sights while others like to go to a beach or resort where they can simply relax and enjoy the sun, surf, and surroundings. You may choose to go with your spouse, with friends, your family, or sometimes go on your own.

Over the past couple of years, I have discovered that I like to go away on my own for just a few days. If I can get away to Ogunquit and simply sit quietly on the beach or get up and walk as the spirit moves me to do so, I come back refreshed and ready to take on the work at hand. It took me a while to realize this; as an extrovert, I have always wanted to surround myself with people as I usually get my energy from others. As I grow older, I have come to appreciate some alone time where I am not subject to multiple questions and decisions that must be made. My trips or times alone have become my physical retreat.

By a show of hands, how many of us here have ever been on a spiritual retreat? It should come as no surprise to you that I didn't enjoy them when I was younger. I remember being at St. Anselm Abbey in New Hampshire. St. Anselm, or St. A's, is run by Benedictine Monks. I was able to stay there for a week for a seminary-mandated retreat the week before classes resumed in January. This retreat was pretty much silent. I can usually do this for a few

hours but that is about it. Most of us have probably been on retreats that happened in places that cater to retreat groups such as Silver Lake in CT, or Craigsville on the Cape. Even in these places, we are encouraged to leave our cell phones and computers aside to enter into a time to be fully present to the group or the task at hand: spiritual retreat.

In our Gospel lesson today, we find Jesus on a forty-day “spiritual retreat”, if you will, or his time in the wilderness to pray. We don’t know how or where he ate and slept, but we humans are the ones who get hung up on that. In Matthew’s gospel (we cheated today as we had just read the account from Mark) we are told that after he was baptized by John in the Jordan that he goes off for his “retreat” in a time of prayer and preparation for his ministry.

On this first Sunday of Lent, we find ourselves in the beginning of quest. Our theme for this Lent is “Season of Lent/Season of Love.” As the spiritual leader of the church, I offer you that it is a time to reflect on how we can open ourselves to receive the unconditional love offered to us by God. God gave us the ultimate act of love in by sending his Son to us in human form, God made flesh, the Incarnation, and having his son not only die for us but having him rise from the dead to make a bold proclamation of being the Christ.

It is up to us to determine if we need to go into some sort of wilderness to prepare ourselves to receive God’s unconditional love. Some may choose to do so. Some may take great comfort in doing one of the traditional practices of Lent in fasting, praying, and/or giving alms. Other people give things up for Lent while others do extra things. If this is you, please consider helping out at

Monday soup lunches that will start up again on February 26. Others may choose to volunteer in the Thrift Shoppe. Some people may choose to attend the Bible Study being offered on Thursdays at 2:30 or 7:00 PM.

Whatever it is that you choose to do, I suggest that all of us take at least a few minutes out of every day to reflect on ways that we can open our hearts to receive God's unconditional love in our hearts. We have only begun this season of Lent/season of Love. If you haven't thought about what you will do throughout these days, it is not too late to make a decision and start. The other thing that I'd like to point out is that if you make a decision on how to open yourself and then stop doing it after a period of time, start up again the next day or the next hour. In the same way that we don't stop receiving God's love, we don't want to stop ourselves from preparing ourselves to fully embrace it.

The concept of looking at Lent as a Season of Love is a bit different, even for me. Today's gospel reminds us that we do not live on only nutritional food but also the spiritual food that comes to us from God out of love. We don't test God, but we embrace God and God's love for us. We don't run from a time in the wilderness if we are called to be there but embrace it as a means to discover what God holds for us.

May we all grow in our acceptance of God's unconditional love for us throughout the Season of Lent/Season of Love. Amen.