

Leave a Little Room for the Holy Spirit

March 9, 2024

Leave a little room for the Holy Spirit

A friend of mine recently learned the phrase, “Leave a little room for the Holy Spirit,” and he uses it ALL the time now. Classically, it was used at high school dances to remind couples to not dance too close to one another. My friend has been using it more broadly: When we saw some folks being overly amorous at a club, as a crowd pressed in on us as we were waiting for a table, even as he upgraded his cell phone and the sales person was a “close talker.” When we’re new to a phrase or idea, it can take on new meanings. Just as my friend has invested the phrase, “Leave a little room for the Holy Spirit” with new meaning.

This year, as so much of so much of our world is being turned upside down, I’m hoping you will invest Lent with new meaning. In particular, I’d like you to look at Lent as a grand attempt to make a little room for the Holy Spirit, for God. The examples I just gave of my friend using the phrase make a little room for the Holy Spirit are all about not having physical space, but what if we apply it to the mental, spiritual, and temporal space that is at a premium in so many lives? How many of us have wanted to get together with a friend or family member, and had to schedule a week or two out? Have you had a day in which you were scheduled so tightly from dawn to dusk that you almost had to plan when you would breathe during the day? How often do those kind of things happen? How about a week in which you got a haircut on Monday and your spouse didn’t notice until Friday, not because of being imperceptive, but because you just haven’t seen each other?

In the book “Margins” Richard Swenson, a psychologist and person of faith, talks about our overloaded lives.

The conditions of modern-day living devour margins. Marginless living is being thirty minutes late to the doctor’s office because you are twenty minutes late getting out of the hairdresser’s because you were ten minutes late dropping the kids at school, because you ran out of gas two blocks from the station and forgot your wallet. Margin, on the other hand, is having breath left at the top of the stairs, money left at the end of the month, and sanity left at the end of the day. Marginless is being asked to carry a load five pounds more than you can lift. Margin is having a friend to carry half the load. Marginless is not having time to finish the book you are reading on stress; margin is reading it, applying it, and sharing it.

So many people are coming to me this year, stressed by the state of the world. Understandably so. We’ve talked about limiting news consumption, about lending time and resources to organizations that are making a difference, about making sure that we’re taking care of people and populations that are vulnerable.

In addition, as a spiritual practice, I encourage you to think of Lent as a season of reclaiming some margin. I encourage you to embrace a practice that will give you a little bit of room to breathe, that will make a little room for the Holy Spirit, that will provide enough wiggle room in some area of life that is causing you stress that you will be able to be more comfortable. All too often, our lives, minds, and spirits are so crammed full that we don’t have room for anything else – good or bad.

A friend of mine is giving up worry for Lent. A successful Lenten discipline for me one year was giving up credit cards – just to re-establish my relationship with purchasing. This year, since I am always trying to get a little more done – one more email sent before that meeting, one more sink of dishes before I leave home – this year, I’m working on being on time for things, working on trying not to pack so much into a day, a moment, an hour, that nothing gets the full attention it deserves. I’m working on being realistic about what will actually fit into a day, and being okay with that.

Giving up worrying, being on time, are spiritual disciplines because, for the most part, at the root of our overloading of our lives is fear, fear that we won’t be good enough, fear that if we don’t do more, folks will (fill in the blank).

This is a terrible disease because it is in fact dis-ease, or an absence of ease itself. We still need Lent, 2000 years after that first Easter, because, while our world has made astonishing progress in matters like technology and psychology, and leprosy, we haven’t done as well with trust.

Our Spirits are in chaos, so we squeeze out our dis-ease by overfilling. Retail therapy squeezes out the fear of not having enough. Getting out one more reminder email about an event here at church drowns out the voice in my head that tells me that you’re all going to judge the effectiveness of my ministry by how many people show up. Having our kids in all the right programs helps us to imagine that they’ll be well-adjusted adults 10 years from now and won’t need therapy. (They will, by the way, and they’ll be talking about you.)

The reality is that all of these things that we overstuff our lives with are really just coping mechanisms. Augustin, the fifth century theologian, is famous for having written, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

The Scriptures

In all three synoptic Gospels, immediately after Jesus is baptized and before he begins his public ministry, he spends 40 days in the wilderness praying. He’s making some margins, creating some psychic, spiritual space, because he knows that the road ahead is going to be full, and he needs some reserves in the tank. Take a page from Jesus’ playbook and make an effort in the next six weeks to make some room for the Holy Spirit.

I guess if you’ve got your heart set on it, creating some margin may be giving up chocolate, but only if chocolate has filled an unhealthy need in your life. More spiritually enriching might be setting a healthy bedtime and sticking to it, eating five fruits and veggies a day, putting an hour a week on your calendar to actually do the art that feeds your soul, cleaning out a closet a week and donating or recycling what you haven’t used in a year, or even better, clearing out and getting rid of the storage unit you haven’t even looked at in years.

In short, a Lent spent creating margins is thinking about what it is in your life that is pushed all the way out to the edges, and making an effort to give it some room. Creating margin in your life may look like fasting from the car radio for the season and using your drive time for prayer instead. What’s more, our Old Testament reading this week calls us to make margins for others. It calls us to leave some of the harvest in the field for the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, to make sure that we are being conscious of others’ well being even as we make our own living.

What might that look like? If you're in a position of power at work, it may mean giving your employees a little time off. For a teacher, it might look like trying to make sure that assignments and tests are reasonably spaced in relation to students' other work. If you have the means, it may look like adding 10% to your food budget for Lent and donating that to the Blessing Box. Not squeezing every penny out of production, every minute out of the day, is a spiritual act.

A pastor I used to work for would joke regularly that a job will expand to fit the time you allow for it. Similarly, all too often, the way we use our resources pushes out to the margins without regard to others. We've all been hearing about aid organizations around the world that are losing their funding. Maybe the Lenten discipline some of us are being called to is to observe a meatless weekdays menu, calculate the cost savings, and donate those funds to an NGO that is now scrambling to figure out how to feed starving kids.

Conclusion

Taking on a Lenten discipline is not about being perfect; it's about being better. Like New Year's resolutions, Lenten disciplines are hard to follow through on because we think of them as totalities. People might think a successful Lent is one in which they didn't have a single drink, they never swore, and they were on time for everything.

In that vein, I hear far too often from people who abandon their Lenten discipline after a week or two because they've already stumbled. Lent isn't about being perfect, it's about being better, so if you struggle to keep that healthy bedtime or if your getting up half an hour early for a prayer walk gets thwarted for a week because of subzero temperatures, get back to it. God isn't keeping a scorecard saying "Bridget was on time for 87% of her meetings, so she can have a meaningful Easter. She's lucky! If she dipped below 85% I wasn't going to let her in."

Let's make this Lent about re-creating margins, addressing the overcrowding of our lives that is symptomatic of our restless spirits. Let's make it about being closer to the people who God would love us to be, about opening up some space so that the Holy Spirit can get in and work its wonders. Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Deuteronomy 24:19-22; Luke 4:1-13
March 9, 2025