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Dear Friends,

A few weeks ago when I was beset with a sinus infection, I went to my doctor, and she wrote me a prescription for an antibiotic. I went to the pharmacy, paid what seemed like a lot of money, and came home with the pills which had very specific instructions about how they were to be taken and for how long.

I suspect most of you have had a similar experience.

**Giving something up** And though the medication was costly, at no point in this process did I think that paying for the pills was the focus of the project. I wanted to get better (this was, after all, at the height of the snow-blowing season), so I made time to see the doctor, I followed her instructions, and I gave something up (about thirty dollars, and that was after the insurance had paid a hefty part of the bill) for the sake of addressing what was making my life out of balance.

And if you remember that we are on the threshold of Lent, you will see where I am going with this story.

Somehow deep in our collective psyches we associate Lent with “giving something up”. In my trip to the pharmacy, I was not focusing on what I was going to give up, and I did not think that paying the bill would have any immediate impact on my disease. I gave something up so I could get something I wanted more than thirty dollars. Giving up the money by itself made no difference at all to my recovery; it is what I gave the money up for that made the difference.

Just giving something up in Lent, without a purpose behind the sacrifice, would be roughly analogous to my giving the pharmacist the money, and then leaving the pills on the counter.

**Why is it always about chocolate?** So if chocolate is the principal barrier between you and the life you want for yourself, your family, and the world, then giving it up for Lent might well be a profitable exercise. Turning things around a bit, what if you were to use this season to address something which is actually eating you? If instead of focusing on what you are going to give up, what might happen if you were to focus on what you need to have, to do, or to become for your life

to be substantially better? And not just your life, but the life of everyone with whom you are in relationship.

While healing and recovery certainly benefit us individually, if we are restored to health, it is for a purpose consistent with God's intent for the world. In my case, it was great to feel better after a few days, but there was also snow to be cleared.

Certainly many of us could stand to lose a few pounds, but Lent is about something potentially much more helpful than dropping a size or fitting into the suit you wore ten years ago.

Lent is a season in which you claim your role in repairing and restoring a broken and distorted creation. But it starts with you.

**Let's fix other people** One of the temptations at St. Elizabeth's—and we are by no means alone in this—is to think, or at least act, as if we are all fine, but there are serious problems out there which smart, good, strong, and healthy people like us are going to go out and fix. My sense is that Jesus spends most of his time challenging people to recognize, acknowledge, and deal with their own issues first. Before you start worrying about the speck in your neighbor's eye, he says, maybe you ought to pay attention to that big piece of lumber in your own.

Certainly there is plenty of work for us to do in a world as messed up as ours is. But part of the challenge of Lent is to start with the harder and scarier work of looking at what is out of balance in our own lives.

And the purpose of “giving something up” is to take a start at addressing something—maybe just one thing—about your life that you think needs to be fixed so the life you have, and the life God intends for you to lead, trend more towards congruence.

People who are serious about breaking a destructive addiction will often take a break from their normal life and go aside for a period of time dedicated only to addressing what they want to fix in their life. Maybe it is thirty days in rehabilitation, maybe it is longer. But what I so admire in the people who have the brains and the guts to take that step is that they have figured out that giving something up which is destroying them, for the sake of regaining their life, is not a burdensome sacrifice but a really good deal.

We all have stuff in our lives which is harmful to us and to others. And very often that stuff is the result of our own choices and actions. And sometimes, maybe even often, we can identify what that destructive stuff is, but are clueless, or terrified, about what it would take to change it.

**Another kind of litany** Specifics? “My work is frustrating and joyless, but I don't know what else to do and I certainly don't know how I would support myself and my family if I quit.” “Money is a real problem—I never feel like we have enough.” “I used to be [fill in the blank] but I don't feel like I am/have that anymore. I don't want to think about it because it just makes me depressed—I'm unhappy and can't imagine how any of this will change.” “My family life has turned out to be very different from what I had hoped for, but I don't know how to fix it or even if it can be fixed.” “Getting older is becoming harder and harder for me—I can't believe this is happening and there's nothing I can do about it.”

**It works until it doesn't** You could certainly add to this list of frustration, disappointment, sadness, depression, and fear. You might well be thinking, “Well that's depressing, why do we have to talk about this?” My sense is that denial—not acknowledging what is truly painful and difficult—is an effective strategy until it isn't, and then, when whatever the issues are have broken through all of our attempts to contain them and keep them out of sight—certainly from others and as much as

possible from ourselves—then we are so overwhelmed that marshalling resources to cope is especially difficult.

And in those moments of stress, it seems to be human nature to seek relief and comfort in behaviors, substances, attitudes, or relationships which just dig the hole deeper.

One of the spiritual sources of denial is an underlying belief that evil is more powerful than we are: “If we can’t do anything about it, let’s at least put off facing it as long as we can.” One of the paradoxes of the Christian life is that we talk about evil and sin precisely because we think they are not inevitably victorious.

**Which comes first?** If you do not believe in absolution, confession is just rubbing salt in the wound. If you do not think there is any effective way by which your sins—your failures, shortcomings, personal inadequacies—can be dealt with, then any reference to them is going to be painful, humiliating, and experienced as a hostile act.

It is precisely because we believe in forgiveness and restoration that we can be open and honest about failure and brokenness. For Christians, our identity is not based on how good we are, nor is the goodness of life defined by whether we feel happy in the moment. Humans, whether we acknowledge it or not, are not in this life alone. Whatever we may believe, we are all creatures of God. Those who have figured that out are playing the game with more resources. To the extent that we, as individuals or as a culture (and think how scary that thought is) pretend that God is an optional, remote abstraction who can be ignored with no real cost—to that extent we are trying to derive a solution to our problems without essential and major data.

The ability to confront sin and failure in the open provides a major head start in denying sin and failure their toxic powers. It is precisely *not* talking about sin which hurts people because that silence leaves those powers which corrupt and destroy the people of God unnamed, unchallenged, and free to rampage unchecked. No one wanted to believe that we had to fight Germany again in the 1930’s; no one wanted to look at what that nation of great art, culture, and science was doing to the Jews, gypsies, physically challenged, or homosexuals, but not looking at what was actually going on did not make the evil go away, nor did it make it easier to address when it could be ignored no longer.

**Here it comes again** One of the advantages of a liturgical calendar is that Lent comes around every year, ready or not. We may intend to look at things in ourselves and our lives which we know need fixing, but right now we’re just too busy. Maybe when things slow down. In the summer. When the kids are off in college. When the kids have jobs. When we have more time. When we retire. As a major league procrastinator, I know how many ways there are to avoid dealing with stuff you, well, want to avoid.

Lent does not wait for an invitation or an appointment. It is here now. Just because it was here last year does not mean we get to skip it this time. Perhaps one thing the liturgical calendar is telling us is that we are never finished dealing with evil. “Will you *persevere* in resisting evil and *whenever* you fall into sin repent and return to the Lord?” Alas, this is not like passing the bar exam where once done, you never have to do it again....

We will start with the Great Litany ready or not. We will read and hear difficult stories, we will talk about dark things, we will address death and the things that lead up to it, and we will look at Jesus on the cross. Just as absolution gives us the ability to make a confession, so what comes after Lent gives us the courage to go into all of these dark places now.

**Get something back for what you give up** So give something up in Lent, but give some serious thought to what you want from that process. Don't just put your money on the pharmacist's counter and walk out the door—take your medicine, too. Because the point is not whether you can give something up or whether you can follow all the instructions that come with the pills.

The point is that we are sick and we don't want to stay sick. The world is a mess and that is both heartbreaking and outrageous. And undergirding all of that disease, distress, and disorder is the power of sin, the power of that which is not God and which chooses that which is not God. Lent is the season when we confront those powers, starting with their toxic manifestation in our own lives. Properly done, that confrontation is hard work. But if we do not flinch, if we do not cut corners, if we trust the power of God to be beside, before, and behind us in this struggle, then the prognosis is very good. Because after Lent comes Easter, after human death—literal or metaphorical—comes God's life, and after sin and despair come grace and glory.

Part of our task in Lent is to find the specific reality in these images and rhetoric, so that when Easter comes and we sing of resurrection, renewal, and rebirth, we will, then too, be talking about ourselves and not just about someone else.

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Rector