

**Sermon Notes:** February 21, 2021

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**Focus:** Personal Anecdotes for a Holy Lent

I have really enjoyed having St Timothy's Lenten Lectionary as a companion this year. Today's notes will function as my own entry into the lectionary. Below is my meditation upon beginning a Holy Lent.

My previous holy Lent involved throwing away molding food and cleaning bathrooms. I had the privilege of knowing a man who taught me how to sing the catholic rosary and how to find joy in really caring for a person. Rob was a government employee who had multiple health issues. He went on permanent medical disability in his early 40's. At the darkest flare ups, just doing the dishes was an impossibility for him.

I remember thinking how bad I felt for him. If he could hear me say that now, he would laugh this huge laugh to dry up my self-righteous pity. Rob was unapologetically living out loud, even as his body betrayed him. I started spending time with him as my "do-good" project, that is, until he became my brother. That lent including my dear, new brother opened my eyes not to a wretched soul, but to a delightful companion who treated *me* with dignity and love.

Everyday, Rob would drive his black truck to a Roman Catholic parish and pray the rosary with eight of his closest and oldest friends, literally. The average age was 81, and he was the only man. I asked him how in the world he could be a gay, Edgar Cayce devotee while converting to Catholicism late in life. He looked at me bewildered. "I don't believe what they say, just how they practice." You can disagree with that sentiment, but hold that problem for a moment to see him on his terms. For him, the rosary was at the center of his prayers.

I was really new to the Episcopal Church, and as you might have pieced together, was insufferably religious. I wore huge silver crosses and dressed with the panache of an industrial chemist. I would wear my prescription safety glasses to dinner with my future in-laws. *Insert facepalm emoji here!*

Nerdery aside, I felt that I had single handedly discovered *the ancient secrets* of an Episcopal Lent. My fasting and praying was going to put John of the Cross to shame. Heroically fighting alongside with Jesus against the powers of darkness was my jam. The idea of self-mortification, fasting, praying, and going to church to get superhero's cape was incredibly enticing.

Using me as a case study, you can see how one might fetish-ize religious practice for its own sake. It is extremely easy to forget that the destination is God instead of detouring to Lent's gift shop. I went full throttle on a 10-day water fast that year. I was so *proud* of myself. "I am really doing something amazing," I thought. Fasting was spiritual savantery, I thought.

However, real life had a different narrative. I hated going to work hungry and leaving hungry. Customers would call my office, but I wanted to yell at them because I needed to focus on being spiritual. Snapping at co-workers was a daily event. *I* was doing something important, but *they* were in the way.

God was good to me. One night after work, I was feeling exhausted, hungry, and positively annoyed that my medieval mysticism wasn't lifting me to higher plane. That

night, I could not stand reading my Bible or devotions. I tried watching TV, but images of chorizo tacos kept dancing through my head. In the middle of that swirl, God spoke inside my head clearly, “Go to Rob’s house.”

I called him and was there 10 minutes later. Rob asked me if I wanted anything to eat and with all the self-conscious humility that I could portray I said, “NO, I am FASTING.” It took me a beat to notice that *he* was hungry and could barely rise from his couch because he was in so much pain. “Can I make you something?” I offered. This was the gift of that Lent. Even with my self-righteous behavior, it was the best dinner I did **not** have that year. I made him dinner, chatted with him, cleaned up the kitchen.

I had the time and space to get out of my own life and be with people that I loved and cared about. Even with mixed motives, the discipline of Lent inspired by God’s voice gave me the emotional and physical bandwidth to see Rob more clearly and love him more dearly. He turned in early that night and asked me to lock the door behind myself. I noticed much of the food was going bad in the fridge and how generally dirty the house was. I did not want to go home and stare at the TV hungry. So, I cleaned his house and arranged the good food to be easily accessible at chair level then left (he had been complaining how he desperately needed a cleaning service.) Driving home I felt like I had just discovered puppies.

Without that Lent, I probably would have kept treating Rob like a spiritual improvement project instead of a true friend. I am still working toward those same goals.

Sidenote: He was wildly inappropriate. When Kimberly and I were dating and getting more serious, we had a small dinner party at my house. We invited my crazy quilt of weirdos, freaks, and friends **and** her family which is a well put together and manicured quilt. Rob, too ill to stand that night, planted himself in a chair. In 30 seconds flat, he shocked my now mother-in-law into stupefied silence. Good times, rest in my power my dear friend.

It would be nice to feel that uncomplicated joy and altruism all the time. But those “thin spaces,” as the Celtics would say, are usually few and far between. I would not trade that experience or my relationship with him for anything. Seeing the world through other people’s eyes; caring about other people’s needs and dignity; and serving without obligatory thank yous is a great beginning to anyone’s lent.

### **Black History Month, week three**

Another person I want to celebrate is Claudette Colvin. She paved the way for the hero you all know, Rosa Parks. Colvin would not become the face of bus desegregation because she was considered too unpolished and too problematic to be the face of Montgomery NAACP’s movement.

Nine months before Rosa Parks refused to move to the back on the bus, Claudette Colvin was arrested as a 15 year-old on a segregated bus in Alabama because she did not give up her seat (March 12, 1955). There is a six-minute episode of [Drunk History with Amber Ruffin telling Colvin’s story](#) that is pretty good. Colvin did not become an icon like Rosa Parks because she was too young, too dark, too pregnant, and too opinionated to be the hero that Parks became.

You may know that Rosa Parks was not just some poor old woman coming home from work. Forty-two at the time, she did not start by sitting in the white section of the bus, **but** as the bus filled, she was asked to relinquish her seat. In other words, the black section moved further back as more white people came on. She was a trained activist before the encounter, and knew the NAACP was looking for an ideal plaintiff. She did not necessarily choose that day's fight, but the coordinated civil action underway certainly buoyed her resolve. This was in part because Rosa Parks worked as an administrator for the local branch of the NAACP. E.D. Nixon, the branch leader at the time saw Park's arrest as their best shot to move the ball forward. Both women are heroes in my mind.

Colvin never backed down after her arrest. Even as she was expelled from high school for getting pregnant and was a prime agitator of moving the legal machinery that would end bus segregation. Colvin had the privileged place to be the last person to address the supreme court 20 months after her arrest on Dec 17, 1956, when SCOTUS outlawed bus segregation.

**Mashama Bailey.** Another aside: There is a wonderful Netflix series called the Chef's Table. Episode 1, 2019 features *The Grey*, a fine dining restaurant in Savannah Georgia. The Grey is run by executive chef Mashama Bailey whose passion and story is worth your time. The Grey is its own icon. Previously, it was the "black's only" bus terminal for Greyhound bus line in Savannah. Now, it is a place for all to experience elevated southern cooking and led by a woman constantly exploring her roots as an African American, while using her training in French cuisine. If I am ever lucky to enough to eat there, I want, I need to try the foie gras and grits.

**Prayer for a right beginning to Lent.** *The Fast Life, Unknown Author*

Fast from judging others;  
Feast on Christ dwelling in them.

Fast from fear of illness;  
Feast on the healing power of God.

Fast from words that pollute;  
Feast on speech that purifies.

Fast from discontent;  
Feast on gratitude.

Fast from anger;  
Feast on patience.

Fast from pessimism;  
Feast on hope.

Fast from negatives;  
Feast on encouragement.

Fast from bitterness;  
Feast on forgiveness.

Fast from self-concern;  
Feast on compassion.

Fast from suspicion;  
Feast on truth.

Fast from gossip;  
Feast on purposeful  
silence.

Fast from problems that  
overwhelm;  
Feast on prayer that  
sustains.

Fast from anxiety;  
Feast on faith

