

On Eating Chocolate for Lent

by Amy Laura Hall (Guest Writer)* on March 9, 2011

Are forms of “giving-up-XYZ-for-Lent” the most pastorally astute habits for women schooled in self-emptying? What are the most apt Lenten practices for women who have already been habituated to submit? And for that matter how might men think about and practice Lent differently given the realities of women’s lives? In short, given the realities of women’s lives today what ought Lenten practices look like?

These questions came up for me early this morning, Ash Wednesday, as I watched this video posted on my Facebook page:

Would it be appropriate for me to recommend and discuss this video, this (clever/sexy) appeal for women’s equality, as Christians begin the work of following Jesus toward the cross? Would students and colleagues perceive it as a power-grab, as a wrong-headed suggestion that women should seek worldly gain rather than lose themselves in Jesus?

I was lecturing years ago on Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of virtue as the mean between two extremes, and on the various penitential practices for graced habituation. Some of the precious students looking back at me had told me during office hours that they were struggling with self-cutting and/or anorexia, and a few of them were also in abusive relationships with young men who were not only *not* worth these women’s beautiful time, but who also had no interest in truly loving these women in their gorgeous vulnerability.

I might have stuck my nose back into my notes, and plowed forward, but I just couldn’t. I stopped the planned lecture and improvised.

I suggested, totally off the cuff, that women who struggle with anorexia should eat chocolate covered strawberries every day of Lent. People laughed a bit, but I warmed to the idea. As a Lenten practice, in order to habituate toward the mean of temperance, some women, and perhaps some men too, might need to eat exactly what they fear, but should love, in order to open themselves to God’s blessing in their student kitchenettes.

I stopped there, but I probably should have continued. I should have talked to them about how ritually submitting to male authority was likely to keep them stuck with a mere mortal, rather than lead them to the Word made flesh. But, it was a beginning.

It was years later that one of these young women contacted me to tell me a story. Her senior pastor had opened his Lenten sermon series with a call to fast. He had recently read a book on discipline and holiness, or something along those lines, and had determined, evidently, that the entire congregation needed to take to heart the call to fast toward holiness.

She wrote to me because she remembered that, during a follow-up conversation after my lecture on strawberries, I had suggested that she bake cookies for herself every day of Lent. I had recommended, evidently, that she treat herself to cookies as a Lenten practice. She further explained that this had been a time of healing for her, a time of unexpected grace, and that, in her own ministry, she was trying hard to discern how to attend to the different needs of the different people in her care.

Not everyone is in the same place. People are sinful in original ways. This certainly is an aspect of what the doctrine of “original sin” means. And so, to meet Jesus in grace during Lent will mean different practices for different people. And, in a deeply patriarchal world, wherein women are taught from their first year to bite their tongue and offer their food, it will take some truly wise and discerning pastors to determine how best to guide their parishioners through Lent.

Given how many evangelical pastors seem intent *not* to attend to and truly counter the habituation of worldly power, I am not terribly hopeful about how Lent is going down this year in many churches in the evangelical world.

Will pastors recommend to the men in their congregation that they wash all the dishes every day during Lent, even if this means that they will have to wake up a bit earlier and go to bed a bit later, perhaps even (shudder) without watching their favorite show on hulu?

Will they recommend that women in their congregation risk the appearance of sloth by taking a bubble bath rather than fast?

Will they call the silenced to speak, and tell the loud to shut their mouths? Will they risk offending, but talking about domestic violence from the pulpit?

I am going to try an annoying practice for Lent. Be prepared. I am going to say or post something feminist every day for Lent. I am going to risk appearing a bit more like stunning-007, even if it means I am mistaken for a worldly liberal or a white lady with a license to kill. I am going to note the grave discrepancies that the video names. I am going to remind colleagues that our refusal to name difference in social location has real consequences as our students leave here and pastor real people with real bodies.

And, may I suggest, dear brothers, that *you* consider, once a day during Lent, what it might look like to live into a savior who *saves us inside of a female body*? Might I suggest, dear brothers, that you risk walking, in drag, toward the Cross?

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