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Deepening Our Faith: A Lenten Reflection

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Over the past two years, I have heard many individuals share with me how much they love this congregation. I have heard again and again how greatly people value the friendships that they have formed here and the experiences they have shared here. This church family is an essential part of their lives and they are committed to this congregation. But I have also heard the admission that people felt less committed to their Christian faith than to this particular church. However much they understood their feelings about their friends and this congregation, they were less clear about their relationship with God. If pressed they would have difficulty expressing what they really believed about God, Jesus, sin, forgiveness, baptism, prayer, sacraments, the Resurrection, and even what they believed happens after we die. People have said that they were perfectly comfortable with the life of the church while being unclear about — if not actually uncomfortable with — with the beliefs and teachings of the Christian church and our United Church of Christ.

Certainly, one of the distinguishing principles of our denomination is the fact that we do not have a rigid set of orthodox beliefs that you are required to hold in order to become a member. We do not recite formal creeds together. Our Sunday School does not revolve around making our children memorize a series of questions and answers. But our denomination is neither an “anything goes” social club nor a philosophical debating society. Of course not. We are a staunchly Christian church. We believe in Jesus and we turn to the timeless wisdom of Scripture to guide us today. Yet we believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in such an open-hearted and open-minded manner that people from a wide range of backgrounds can all feel that they belong here and that they can worship together without having to pass any litmus tests of orthodoxy. People can worship together, honestly and sincerely, regardless of who they are and where they are on life’s journey. It is not just a slogan for us but is our sincerely held guiding principle.

But this precious freedom of belief and liberty of conscience comes with a price. When called to engage in the five areas of Christian life – worship, proclamation, education, fellowship, and service — we can find ourselves very uncomfortable trying to articulate clearly and convincingly to our neighbors, to our children, and to seekers what it is, in fact, that we believe and that binds us together uniquely in this church.

In a few days we will begin the season of Lent. In some churches, Lent is understood to be a somber period of self-denial extracted by a demanding God in return for the joy of Easter. Our church views Lent entirely differently. Just like prayer and worship, we understand Lent to be a gift offered to help us deepen our faith and to help us grow spiritually. Rather than asking for us to deny ourselves for God, we view it as a time to open ourselves up to receive blessings freely given to us by God. We can use the season of Lent to bring us closer to God or we can just go on with our lives treating Lent like any other 40 days of the year.

I invite you to view Lent as a season not of denial but of blessing. I urge you to consider giving up something for Lent. But I do not use the phrase “giving up” in the usual sense of

“doing without” as in “giving up chocolates for Lent.” No. I suggest “giving up” in the sense of letting go. Let go of your doubts and uncertainties. Use the season to move from an uncomfortable “I’m not sure what I believe” to a reassuring sense of knowing what you believe. So I invite you to give up the sense of “I’m just not sure” or even “I’ve really never given it any serious thought.” Seize these 40 days and make the time to reflect on what you know you believe, on what you know you don’t believe, and on that huge area in the middle that you really aren’t sure about. Give up some of that uncertainty.

So much of our “busyness” with church life has little to do with our relationship with God. We have so many important meetings and projects to fill all the hours allotted to our church life, that we simply don’t leave any room or time for active faith growth. We don’t pray except when we are frightened by the doctor’s diagnosis. We don’t read Scripture unless it is printed in the Sunday bulletin. We don’t give a thought to sin and forgiveness except when the preacher brings up these terms during one of those tedious gaps between the beautiful worship music. So this Lenten season I also suggest “giving up for Lent” in the sense of surrendering. Give yourself up to God rather than mere busyness. Experience the fountain of blessings that is the season of Lent.