

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Let me start with a question. How do you feel about Lent? Is it a burden? Is it a downer? Let me share a childhood memory with you. We were visiting my grandparents and I was probably about 12 years old. I was looking out the kitchen window at my grandmother's garden and made the comment that winter was brown and gray and nothing was alive. She told me that winter was necessary. That the trees and the dirt worked hard all spring, summer and fall to bring people the fruits and vegetables that people needed. Just like we get tired after doing some long hard work, that the trees and ground were tired too. They needed to rest and sleep all winter so that they were strong for the following year. The season of Lent is a gift. It is our time to rest after the excitement and celebration of Christmas along with all the business and energy that it takes to make the holiday a success.

Christmas was just two months ago. We all know how much work it takes to get ready – decorating, mailing Christmas cards, buying, wrapping, baking, cooking, giving, getting, hosting, sharing. The list is long. And we are exhausted by December 26<sup>th</sup>. But then there is more to do – getting rid of boxes and containers, throwing out shredded wrapping paper. Taking things down, putting things in the basement or the attic. It is a wonderful and loving time of the year. But we're tired at the end of it.

Now think how you would feel if Easter came just 4 weeks after Christmas?

Looking for a new Easter outfit. Getting Easter baskets out of the attic. Dyeing eggs, buying candy for the kids or grandkids. Finding a big enough ham for the Easter lunch. Doing, doing, doing. But Easter is not 4 weeks after Christmas.

Instead, we have the end of December, all of January and usually part of March.

And then the forty days of Lent to prepare for Easter. Forty days to draw closer to God.

Again, how do you feel about Lent. Our church has midweek Lenten services.

Last year we concentrated on the commonly used practices such as fasting, meditation, prayer, giving up something and other topics. Lent is a time to stop, regroup spiritually, look inwardly, maybe do some spiritual house keeping and to then set your eyes not on the worldly Easter but the biblical Easter.

The title of my sermon today is Mercy Not Judgement. At a discussion group last year, we were studying one of the conversations that Jesus had with his disciples where the disciples were calling for judgement and Jesus was explaining that mercy was the answer. A study by sociologists found that people make about 10,000 decisions every day. That seems like an impossible number but from the

time we wake up to the time we fall asleep we are constantly making decisions.

We wake up - do we get up or do we roll over for a few more minutes of rest?

What will we wear? What will we eat? When will we leave for work? If retired – what will we do next? For me, I grab the paper and do the crossword puzzle and the cypher puzzle. Our days are filled with automatic decisions as well as deliberate decisions.

And some of the decisions we make each day have to do with how we see a situation and how we react to it. Is our first reaction one of judgement or of mercy? Example: you are in the grocery store, and you are ready to check out. You are lined up to put your groceries on the conveyor belt and someone steps right in front of you and places their items down. What is your reaction? Anger? Judgement? Mercy? Or, you are driving down the road and someone cuts you off. You struggle to keep your car under control. How do you react? You see an article on tv about homeless people. We have a friend who reacts angrily to this topic. He says things like – they just need to get a job, they are lazy, they just want a handout. They want others to take care of them. How do we see others? What does Jesus call us to do? How does the world see things? What lies does the world tell us?

Jesus was mercy personified. Jesus extended mercy to everyone, to the whole world. Jesus proclaimed the ultimate mercy from the cross. Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing. The very people who tortured him, and executed him – Jesus asked God to forgive them.

This Lenten season I ask you to consider giving up the lies of the world. The lies that say if you are not rich, you are a failure. The lie that if you don't have a big house and a new expensive car that you are a failure. The lie that says no matter how much you have that you need more. The list is endless. The right neighborhood, the right clothes, the best of everything. The world calls us every time we turn on the tv, pick up a paper or a magazine.

Jesus calls us to see that we each have enough. Enough for ourselves and enough to share with those who have less. Jesus calls us to care for others with mercy, love, and without judgement. Let the next 40 days guide you to a closer relationship with Jesus. And finding mercy for everyone, even when the world tells us that many do not deserve mercy. Mercy and not judgement.

Amen