

Homily by The Rev. Deacon Rebecca Saager

Sunday, March 1, 2020 – Lent 1

Lord; Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me this Lent.

Christ spent 40 days and nights in the desert fasting, praying and listening for the word of the Lord. Standing up to the temptations of the devil, and the temptations of materialism and worldly power.

Lent for me is a time to model the behavior of Jesus – standing up to temptations, listening and praying. I think of Lent as a good time to make connections between my religious practices and my daily life.

As a child, giving up chocolate was the biggest temptation for me. As a teenager, I chose to avoid hurtful words. As an adult, I look at my material possessions and reflect on which have become a temptation to hang on to, to hoard and not to share.

We each have many temptations; do we hang on to our time, our talents or our money? These temptations can change as life goes on.

Father Peter reminded us on Ash Wednesday that spending a few more minutes with God, growing in your relationship with the LORD, could be a part of your Lenten discipline. Praying the daily office, or reading the Lenten Meditations booklet from Episcopal Relief & Development.

If you know a little about the Episcopal Relief and Development you might compare it to the Red Cross. There are some major basis differences. In the case of an emergency disaster; natural or otherwise, the Red Cross is there in the beginning to provide food, housing and basic needs. Episcopal Relief and Development comes in to provide resources during the long haul, to help a community access what is the most pressing long-term goal and what do the community members need to rebuild their lives.

This Lenten season, Episcopal Relief & Development is offering a meditation series that explores the spiritual lives of children and what they can teach us. These readings are a moving collection of daily reminders that even the youngest among us, often overlooked, are a beautiful reminder of the love, compassion and nurture of Jesus.

Episcopal Relief & Development recently announced the launch of ONE THOUSAND DAYS OF LOVE, a \$3 million grassroots church-wide fundraising campaign dedicated to expanding the organization's global programs improving the lives of children up to age six. The campaign will run for 1,000 days, ending May 31, 2022.

“As we save children, we save ourselves, we save our world,” said the Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church. “This Lent, I invite all of us to join Episcopal Relief & Development in focusing on the spiritual lessons we can learn from the children in our lives and around the world.”

The Presiding Bishop continues, “Love allows us to bridge great distances so that children an ocean away are as precious to us as the little ones living right down the block,”... “Episcopal Relief & Development programs allow us to share our love with thousands of children in Africa, Asia and Latin America. With your help, we can demonstrate God's love to thousands more.”

Research shows that the first 1,000 days for children are critical in setting a foundation that affects their ability to grow, learn and thrive over their entire lives. Around the world, 155 million children under five are stunted due to inadequate nutrition and health care. Episcopal Relief & Development works with communities to ensure that children have access to food, clean water, and quality health care.

The 2020 Lenten Meditations support ONE THOUSAND DAYS OF LOVE to expand the organization's programs that focus on children.

Another example of how the organization is changing the lives of children is through *Moments That Matter*, a program partnership of Episcopal Relief & Development that works directly with mothers, fathers and other primary caregivers to improve the growth and development of children up to age three. The program also links families with available health, nutrition and critical services provided by government and other stakeholders and strengthens the community's early childhood development capabilities.

"We believe that every child deserves to reach their full potential," said Abigail Nelson, Senior Vice President, Programs for Episcopal Relief & Development. "Our integrated programs are designed to work together, to address many of the challenges faced by marginalized communities, and to give children the opportunity to thrive throughout their lives."

"More than a decade ago, General Convention asked Episcopalians to remember and support Episcopal Relief & Development during Lent. Since then, our annual observance of a holy Lent has been made more meaningful by remembering their lifesaving work around the globe," said the Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, president, House of Deputies for The Episcopal Church and contributor to the Lenten Meditations. "Each year, I am grateful for the daily meditation booklet and online devotional that forms part of my Lenten discipline and for those across the church who contribute to it."

For over 75 years, Episcopal Relief & Development has been working together with supporters and partners for lasting change around the world. Each year the organization facilitates healthier, more fulfilling lives for more than 3 million people struggling with hunger, poverty, disaster and disease.

Inspired by the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, Episcopal Relief & Development leverages the expertise and resources of Anglican and other partners to deliver measurable and sustainable change in three signature program areas: Women, Children and Climate.

The US regularly experiences a wide range of natural disasters. Hurricanes, tornadoes and floods threaten the South, Midwest and other regions each year. Blizzards and ice storms impact the country's northern areas, and earthquakes and wildfires are ever-present in the West. In recent years, the US has seen an uptick in *record-breaking disasters*. For example, the US was impacted by approximately 31 separate disaster events, including five hurricanes, three inland floods, two wildfires, two droughts, 12 severe storms and four winter storms since 2017. Especially today, as the changing climate exacerbates the frequency and intensity of these events, support for impacted communities must be immediate, and recovery must be strategic and sustainable.

Episcopal Relief & Development's US Disaster Program connects, equips and inspires leaders in The Episcopal Church to prepare for and respond to disasters in their communities, particularly focusing on helping vulnerable groups of people to withstand the impact of a disaster and to return to a state of normalcy after an event. You can find out more information about the work that the Episcopal Relief & Development are doing on their website or by speaking with me.

A story relayed to me this past week that reminded me of myself and the work the Episcopal Relief and Development is doing around the world.

Maybe it will remind you of someone you know.

Ash Wednesday; as the beginning to Lent, is a reminder that we are fashioned from dust, and to dust we will return. However, children are a reminder that a whole lot happens between those dusty bookends, and while we are on this Earth, we have work to do – and we can't always do it alone.

My friend's son is at the age where he wants to do everything on his own. One recent morning, they were getting ready for his day at preschool, and he decided he needed to dress himself. They had just completed the delicate negotiations about what he would wear when he spoke the familiar words, "No, Mommy, I want to do it. Can I please do it?"

What ensued was an hour-long battle with underwear, pants, two different shirts (he changed his mind halfway through), a sweatshirt and a zipper. The arm would go in the wrong armhole. Two legs would come out of one pant leg. You get the picture. She offered to help him untangle himself. She asked him if he wanted her to show him a more efficient way. She even demonstrated with her clothing. To no avail. His response was always, "No, Mommy, I want to do it."

When he finally finished dressing, he broke down into tears and then ran into her arms. He had accomplished, on his own, a task that would have taken only a few minutes with her help. However, the struggle was more significant than his sense of accomplishment. He was depleted. Regardless, he knew She would be there to comfort him, to kiss his head and to praise him for his perseverance.

As I think about this time with her son, I am reminded of Jesus. I can only imagine him watching us struggle, wanting to reach out and help or offer guidance, only to be rebuffed by our desire to do it ourselves. How frustrating must it be to watch us wrestle with life knowing that the struggle could be alleviated if we would only be willing to ask for or receive help. A hard-learned lesson taught to me by a three-year-old. The children in our lives, our greatest gifts, are also some of our most profound sages. "I have learned from her son that together we can accomplish more, with more peace, than we could ever do alone."

So this Lent, let us remember that loneliness and loss of hope plague so many people in this world. The struggles that so many live with day to day. But people can go from languishing to thriving when someone cares that they do. We each walk by people every day who are languishing,

Noticing them is one step.

Reaching out is a second step.

Then the magical step of caring and not giving up is where God's work can really be done through us.

We cannot save anyone, but we can love. We can share our resources; we cannot work a miracle, but God can through us. We cannot be all things to all people, but we can be something to someone who needs us and who God puts in our path or on our heart.

I pray this Lent you will open your heart and mind to God. To let your willing hands be instruments of help and hope to a dark and needing world.