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Our Lady of Dallas Cistercian Abbey
1st Sunday of Lent – Year A
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Gospel: Matthew 4: 1-11

Today is the First Sunday of Lent, and so we begin our season of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. A little while ago, I was reading an article on how to make positive changes in your life. It was a physical fitness article. But I believe it can easily be applied to spiritual fitness and our Lenten discipline. According to the article, there are three keys to positive change. First is to want the change, second is to believe that the change will make life better, and third is to believe that we are capable of the change.

First tip: want the change. We all know that fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are good for us. We all have heard dozens of sermons outlining why we should do them. We all have that in our heads. But we don't have it in our hearts. We all know that changing our spiritual discipline during Lent is good for us. But very few of us actually want to do it. Very few of us truly want the change.

I believe community can help us with this first tip. I believe community can help us want the change. Community can help us desire in our hearts to take on fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.

If we surround ourselves with people who want the change. Who want the change for themselves. Who want the change for us. If we surround ourselves with people who have that desire, that love, that heart for fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. If we surround ourselves with people like that, we will be inspired. If we put ourselves in the right community, our hearts will change. Our wills will change. Our desires will change. If we join forces with people who inspire us, we too will be inspired. Inspired to change. Inspired to want the change. Inspired to fast, pray, and give alms.

We can see the opposite of this first tip in today's first reading from Genesis. When looking at the story of The Fall, we tend to place most of the blame on Eve. She is the one who gave into the serpent's temptation. She is the one who gave Adam the fruit of the tree. However, Adam is also to blame. He simply stood on the side and watched. He let his bride face the serpent alone. He did not defend her or offer his help. If the two of them were united in community, if the two of them faced the serpent together, it would have been easier for them to avoid temptation. If Adam stood by Eve's side and inspired her to resist temptation, things would be quite different. If we have a community stand by our side and inspire us to change, inspire us to fast, pray, and give alms. Again, things would be quite different.

Second tip: believe the change will make life better. As I mentioned before, we all have heard sermons about the spiritual benefits of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. But deep down inside, we all think that the hardships and the difficulties of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving outweigh the spiritual benefits. Deep down inside, we think that doing these things will really just make us miserable. Temporarily miserable until Lent is over. But definitely miserable. Deep down inside, we rarely think that the spiritual benefits of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving will actually make our lives better.

I believe understanding Christ's salvation a little more can help us with this second tip. When we sin, we bring disorder to the world. We mess things up. We mess up ourselves and everything and everyone around us. When Christ brings salvation, He makes right what we made wrong. He gives order to where we have made disorder. In the Incarnation, Christ takes on the hunger, the loneliness, and the poverty of this world. And He undoes it. He transforms the hunger, loneliness, and poverty of this world and turns them into fulfillment, communion, and richness of life.

We can do the same. The more we understand Christ's salvation, the more we can take part in it. By fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, we can undo the hunger, the loneliness, and poverty of this world. If we understand that, we begin to see how fasting, prayer, and almsgiving makes life better. Not just miserable.

We can see this in today's second reading from Romans. Saint Paul offers us a contrast between Adam and Jesus Christ. Adam brought about sin and death. He brought disorder to our world and to our lives. Jesus Christ, in contrast, undoes what Adam did. Christ takes death and uses it to undo sin. By His death, Christ takes away the messiness of our world and our lives and gives them righteousness. If we understand that message, we will start to believe that fasting, prayer, and almsgiving makes our life and makes our world more righteous, more ordered. If we understand that message, we will begin to believe the change makes our life better.

Third tip: believe that we are capable of the change. Most of us tend to be pretty modest, pretty conservative when selecting our Lenten disciplines. We do this because we are afraid to pick something truly challenging. We don't want to pick the really difficult path because we doubt ourselves. We are worried that if we try something hard then we won't be able to complete the 40-days of Lent. And then we will fall flat on our faces.

I am a fairly negative and pessimistic person. And so honestly, I think most of us are right in that assessment. We really are not good at fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. And we really are not capable of making the change and sticking to it.

I believe learning to trust in Christ more can help us with this third tip. For man, becoming more disciplined, resisting temptation, and truly changing our lives is impossible. But not for God. All things are possible with God. Here we see one of the many paradoxes of the faith. We can only be capable of the change when we realize how incapable we are. We can only believe change

is possible if we place our belief in Christ, not ourselves. And so I urge you to pick the seemingly impossible spiritual discipline this Lenten season. And place your faith, hope, and trust in Christ. He will triumph where we fail if we let Him.

We can see this in today's Gospel. Christ made us one with Him when He chose to be tempted by the devil. Christ suffered temptation and death in our nature, in our human nature. But He also conquered temptation and the tempter in our nature. And so by His power, He has gained victory for us all. If you see yourself as tempted in Christ, then you can see yourself as victorious in Christ. Through Him, we are capable of the change. Without Him, we are not. Without Him, we simply try to live on bread alone. Without Him, we try to put God to the test. Without Him, we try to rule over kingdoms of the earth in their magnificence. With Him, we can fast, pray, and give alms.

And so as we begin our Lenten journey, let us please keep in mind these three keys for positive change. First, build up a community around you to inspire you to want to fast, pray, and give alms. Second, understand how Christ undoes the messiness of this world so that we can believe that fasting, prayer, and almsgiving will make life better. Third, trust in Christ, not in ourselves so that we can believe we are capable of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.