

Today we enter into the church season of Lent, 40 days, until Easter, not counting Sundays. In the earliest church, it was a special time of preparation for those who wished to join the church by baptism. Before their baptism on a Holy Saturday, these catechumens could be present at worship services, but had to leave before the celebration of the Eucharist. That holy mystery was forbidden them until they had been well schooled in its meaning. The process of formation lasted from one Lent until the Easter of the next year, at which time they were felt to be ready to come to baptism and eucharist.

Obviously the church has moved a long way since then, so the meaning of Lent may not be as clear to us. What is it we are to be about in this season? When I was younger, the question that was often asked of friends was, "What are you giving up for Lent this year?" For the younger of us, it usually had to do with giving up candy or ice cream. I don't remember adults ever talking about giving something up.

Then our friend, Tom, converted to the Eastern Orthodox church, and I learned about what is called, in that tradition, The Great Fast of Lent. The Great Fast means that all adults, not just clergy, give up meat, fish, eggs, dairy, wine and oil. I actually had to look up what they can eat. The question in my mind was why was their practice so extreme?

To understand this, we would have to remember that fasting used to be a normal and regularly recurring religious practice for Jews and Christians. Fasting, prayer and giving of alms were felt to be forms of discipline that helped people grow in their spiritual lives. In other words, these were not rote practices to be endured, but were means to form souls more ready for the Kingdom of God.

And you will notice in the Gospel reading from Matthew that those who fasted, prayed and gave were not to parade their piety in front of a watching audience to emphasize to the surrounding world what good people they were. Instead, these things were to

be the fuel that turned minds and hearts from ordinary roads to a center in God.

Canadian pastor, Mark Buchanan said, “If this were a multimedia presentation, I would now flash up a picture of our lives—our mindless and fruitless preoccupations. And beneath I would put the caption: “Consumption is killing us. Go fast and live.”

I think he was referring to literal fasting –not eating for a day every so often. But our lives are burdened with a frenzy of consuming the goods of the world, usually extending well beyond food. A new car, new furniture, nowadays a home office, a huge television to binge watch Netflix, more and better and keeping up with the Joneses, even if we can't be in the same room with them.

The problem is that none of these things, or even all of these things, will bring us joy. In fact, studies repeatedly show that the curve of life satisfaction goes up gradually when what we have increases to better meet our true needs. But then at a relatively low mark, it levels off, and starts to go down as we accumulate a bit more and a bit more, until we have to rent a storage shed. We literally cannot buy happiness, only a vague sense of dissatisfaction.

You may have noticed that during our worship in Lent we do not use the word “Alleluia.” It only returns with Easter liturgies. But in the Orthodox traditions, throughout that Great Fast, liturgies and prayers have more Alleluias, because limiting one's consuming of something as important as food brings with it such joy.

I wonder if they are not on to something. If our consuming more and more of the world's goods gradually brings us less and less peace and satisfaction, the movement of ‘alleluia’ in our lives seems to be stamped out, our movement toward God is blocked by our too-muchness.

Perhaps this Lent comes with a call to stop our grabbing at the world in order to be captured by the true love that is trying to call us to the Kingdom of God. Six weeks could give us practice in turning our attention away from a dizzying array of wants and toward true desire – the one true desire and longing we saw in Jesus Christ, leading us home to God.