

My dear friends in Christ,

When we look ahead into this new week, we see this coming Wednesday is none other than Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

It is interesting this year, this will be the earliest Ash Wednesday we have had for the past 20 years, and this year, Ash Wednesday falls on a leap year.

I am sure for most of us, we are just not ready for Lent. It is less than a month since we completed the Christmas season. We could use a little more time to catch our spiritual breath.

But today, my friends, ready or not, here comes Lent. Even if we are not ready for Lent, Lent is ready for us.

To help enter Lent, I want to share a few thoughts that may be helpful for all of us.

On Ash Wednesday, we the Christian faithful around the world lift up our faces to be signed with ashes. This sign is meant to remind us both of our mortality and of the promise of new life through repentance. The ashes signal entry into the holy season of Lent, a time of fasting, an opportunity to deprive the body and consequently make room for the spirit.

Truth to tell, these days Americans harbor an extra motive for fasting; as a whole, we are much too overweight. In fact, the *Harper's Index of Statistics* states that, at the current rate of increase, all Americans will be overweight by the year 2059!

Still, while fasting from food can be good practice as an act of discipline – and nothing can be achieved without discipline – I challenge you to consider another view as you ponder the Lenten season. It is as important to control of what goes into your mouth as it is to control what comes out of your mouth. And so this year, I would like you to consider fasting from what comes out of your mouth.

There are four areas we might consider in this kind of fasting. The first is fasting from foul language. The air around us is full of it, and not just from the Howard Sterns and Jerry Springers of the media. The f-word is commonplace in movies, in song lyrics, in novels and magazine articles, and in everyday conversation. Sometimes it seems as if everyone – from CEO's to detectives, presidents of colleges and banks, people with degrees up and down their arms, high schoolers and middle schoolers, can't say a single sentence without a dirty or vulgar word. All that education, and still, from the mouths of men – and in the spirit of equality, increasingly women – spew forth language unheard in public twenty years ago. Foul language has even become part of our children's vocabulary.

Crude talk and endless sexual double meanings pollute commercials, TV shows, and daily conversation. This has become so commonplace that we take it all in as part of normal discourse. But when locker room talk becomes the ordinary means of communication, it devalues us. I

suppose all this foul talk from children and adults alike is meant to signal freedom – but to my mind, all it signals is poverty of vocabulary and a small mind, a small heart. Certainly, foul language has no place in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

So, the first practice for Lent – for all of us, young, old, and in between – is to watch our language. Watch what comes out of your mouth, for what comes out tells what is inside your heart. Using foul, dirty language, or telling a smutty joke may make you feel like a big shot, one of the gang. But it belies the fact that you are not one of the gang. Remember, you are one of Christ's gang. You are God's child, and God's children don't talk like that.

The second Lenten practice is to keep judgments from spilling out from your mouth. This might be hard to do for the whole of Lent, but maybe you can pick one day to keep your judgments to yourself. Friday is a good choice, in honor of Jesus' crucifixion. This was also the day when he also granted paradise to the man on his right, the good thief, whom we would have deemed unworthy of God's attention.

And so for each Friday in Lent, make no judgments about people: about their motives, their goodness or badness, their social standing, their defects, their clothes, their color, their jobs, their mistakes. Just see everyone as God's children, people for whom Christ died, fellow pilgrims. For one day a week during Lent, avoid letting negative judgments come forth from your mouth.

Thirdly, try to control the verbal negatives that so readily come from our mouths. Not just the hate language, but the put-downs, the jabs that hurt, the insults, the criticism, the condemnations, the sarcasm, the harmful gossip, the rumor that smears. Again, if it's too much of a challenge to do this on every day of Lent, make it just one day a week. You may want to choose Wednesday as your no-negative-words day, as tradition holds that this was the day Judas let the words which betrayed Jesus fall from his mouth.

Kathleen Norris, the prize-winning poet and spiritual writer, was a "Navy brat," as the phrase goes. She writes of the time she had moved with her family to Hawaii, where she had to attend a new school with other children of military parents. She was a new seventh-grader in a school where the other kids had been there together since kindergarten. These children "were less than receptive to a socially awkward, chubby, buck-toothed girl from the mainland who knew next to nothing about their world." Yet by the midafternoon of her first day in the school, Norris thought that things might work out well between her and the other students.

But as she was sitting in a bathroom stall, she heard several girls enter the bathroom. To her chagrin, it quickly became obvious that they were talking about her, mocking her hair, her weight, her shoes, her clothes, her voice, and her manner – until one of them noticed her shoes in the stall. "Omgod, she's in here," one of them whispered and they fled.

Norris writes: One of the hardest things I ever had to do was to walk back into that classroom, knowing that three pairs of eyes would be watching me very intently. I did not then understand that those girls might feel some remorse. I did wonder if they would worry that I had recognized their voices. But I hadn't been at their school long enough to do that. Every girl in that room was

suspect to me. And a few minutes in the bathroom had taught me that it was decidedly “their” school, and that I was an unwelcome interloper...I had to struggle with myself not to run away that afternoon. I did not do so because I am stubborn, and proud. I refused to let my enemies know – already they had become my enemies – how deeply they had wounded me.

Words can hurt. Avoid the verbal negatives for the Wednesdays of Lent.

The fourth Lenten practice is to let the word “no” fall more often from your mouth. After all, your “nos” define you every bit as much as your “yesses.” Jesus is our guide. When he cured the man possessed of a demon and that man wanted to follow him, he said no. “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” You will give glory to God if you bloom where you’re planted.

When Pilate questioned Jesus, he shook his head no and refused to answer, for he knew Pilate wasn’t really after the truth. He said no to the pain-dulling hyssop offered to him on the cross. He would go all the way for us. And in today’s gospel, Jesus said no to turning stones into bread for he did not come to serve himself. (On the other hand, when it came to giving bread to others, to the five thousand in the desert, he said yes.)

So, be like Jesus for Lent. Say no to drugs. Say no to premarital sex. Say no to infidelity. Say no to cheating. Say no to lies. Say no to over-consumption. But say yes to the truth. Say yes to words that encourage and heal. Say yes to charitable deeds and sharing. Say yes to prayer time. Say yes to your family’s need for your presence and time. Say yes to Jesus.

So let’s repeat our four Lenten practices:
First, watch out for foul, dirty language;
Second, avoid judgments;
Third, avoid verbal negatives;
And fourth, learn to speak the word “no.”

Cleaning up our mouths makes room for the positive words, for the encouraging word we all need, and for the prayer-word we must speak in sincerity and truth. All this is very hard work because we usually don’t even think about what comes out of our mouths. But listen to yourself. Listen to your friends. Listen in on conversations and hear the vulgarities that weave through them. Then, ask yourself, “I eat with this mouth?” More to the point: you eat the Body and Blood of Christ with that mouth? You take communion with that mouth?

The devil offered to turn stones into bread if Jesus would feed only himself, and Jesus opened his mouth and said no. The devil offered a magic show if Jesus would be popular, and Jesus opened his mouth and said no. The devil offered a mall full of goodies if Jesus would sell his soul, and Jesus opened his mouth and said no.

God offered Jesus the cross for our salvation. Jesus opened his mouth and said, “Father, not my will but thine be done.”