

**United Church of Fayetteville**  
**310 E. Genesee Street**  
**Fayetteville, NY 13066**  
**Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even**  
**February 21, 2010**

**LONG-TERM COMMITMENT** Deut. 26:1-11(portions) Luke 4:1-13(portions)

At the last two churches I served, it was the custom to recognize long-term marriages/unions on Valentine's weekend. We did that, while clearly articulating the varied relationships through which humans connect with others; and without judging those who choose not to or are unable to marry, for one reason or another. Nonetheless, in a hearts and flowers weekend, as a Church which celebrates weddings, we also wanted to affirm the values of faith, commitment and hard work that sustained those relationships. We chose 25 years as a starting point. On the day of the very first recognition a woman greeted me at the door with these words:

“I want us to be on next year's list.”

“Send us your marriage date, and we'll be happy to include you.”

“Oh, we have only been married 11 years, but it feels longer and some of our friends weren't married this long, so ours is a long-term marriage.”

Perceptions of the length of a commitment vary according to person and circumstance. I remember holding my breath signing my first three-year car loan. Yet, when I signed a 30 year house mortgage, that car loan seemed a blink in time. With grief or humor, we might debate what exactly constitutes a long-term relationship, but the truth is, over time, the definition is changing. Some years ago, I attended a conference on building small groups in the church. As we discussed ways to help people to build relationships, the leader spoke of the waning days of life-long, life-stage long or even year-long classes and groups. The most startling and useful information we received was that repeated surveys show that most Americans consider six weeks to be a long-term commitment. (Glad you laughed. I may remind you of that in a few minutes.)

Six weeks. I hope when it comes to marriage or child-rearing or any number of very important things, we think that an absurd number. My guess is that number is related to questions like “For how long can I keep every Tuesday night open without having an appointment, or going to my child's play or out with my spouse or having to work late or or or...” Still, only six weeks.

But, if we think about going on a diet, or giving up a bad habit, or acquiring a good one, I suspect most of us would think six weeks a respectable commitment. Curiously, that is about the same amount of time that it takes to acquire a new habit. While the timeline can differ with the individual, along with the kind of habit we're acquiring, most experts will say that it takes between 30 and 40 repetitions (or roughly six weeks) to make something a habit or to give one up. Perhaps, our speedy society is on to something – to commit to something for six weeks can indeed be a long-term commitment -- if it leads to the development of a life-long change.

I doubt early Christians had any of that in mind as they developed the oldest of the holy seasons of the church year, Lent. Forty was a symbolic number in biblical times: forty years wandering in the wilderness; forty days in the desert; and so forty days and six Sundays came to comprise the season of Lent. Today's Hebrew scripture encourages us to consider the bounty of our lives and give its first fruit to the Lord. The very first bounty we have received is life itself. Writing of the season of Lent, author Frederick Buechner points out that 40 days is roughly one tenth of the year – a tithe of the days of our lives – even the first fruits of the year fruit belong to the Lord.

However, it came to be, we have inherited a six week season in which to intentionally explore our faith, consider our lives, and deepen our relationships with God, Christ and one another.

It is a season -- a journey we began as a community in Ash Wednesday worship. It is a season in which, as a community, we will be shaped by our worship from week to week. This Lent, we've been intentional about designing our worship to remind us Sunday after Sunday of where we are, what we are about and what we have to offer to the Lord. Each week, we will reflect on Jesus' life and ministry through the lectionary recommended Scriptures and seasonal music. We will examine our lives for how we fall short of who we have been created to be and we will look with hope toward who, with the help of God in Christ, we might yet become. Insofar as we are able, we'll let ourselves be formed not only by word and thought, but by music and

prayer, silence and speech, light and darkness. Following our confession, we'll sing a prayer for mercy, and watch as the light wanes toward the darkness of Good Friday. We'll sing rather than say the Lord's Prayer to sear it into our hearts and souls in a new way. Sunday after Sunday, in the rhythms of our worship, we'll remind ourselves of a holy season, a tithing of days, and the possibility of starting again or for the first time. Perhaps most importantly, we will remind ourselves of the long-term commitment we are asked to make for the sake of the Lord who committed everything for our sakes.

We travel as a community, but we are individuals who bring our own gifts, needs and baggage to the road. Among us are those who wish to leave behind habits that hurt us; those who wish to heal relationships; those who want to expand service in Christ's name; who want to be more spiritual, in the variety of ways we might mean that; who want to be more faithful; who want to love ourselves as we love our neighbors, or conversely love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Lent is a time of preparation – a time when we make space for God to work within us for wholeness. Through this offering of ourselves, we can find hope and creativity, quiet reflection and strength for change. If God has given us the gift of days, then the Church has given us the gift of Lent.

Our congregation offers many opportunities to move us on the road toward fuller richer living. We will gather around tables sharing simple meals and the stories of our lives; there are experiential events for children and teens to explore themes and traditions of the season; time for adults to reflect on spiritual lives and try new spiritual practices; there is Nightwatch, a retreat experience for youth and adults; the services of Holy Week; and a vigil for quiet prayer and memory of those lost to us in this life. There are private acts of devotion, prayer and study that can take us to new depths of faith and heights of hope, if only we make a long-term commitment of six weeks to let God work in us.

Yet, even allowing God to work within us requires something active on our part. Last week, Rabbi Ain preached about Judaism and what it takes to form people in the faith. When she was finished speaking of the practices of worship and daily living that prepare hearts and souls for spiritual experiences and faithful life, I wanted to stand up and say, "What she said." So today I'll say, "What she said."

According to faith and science it takes six weeks. Who knows? Six weeks is not a life time, but it can change one. If we commit ourselves to a new activity, a spiritual practice, a community service, Bible-study, worship, fellowship, study or sharing for the Lenten season, we might indeed find ourselves changed, not just for a few weeks or months, but with a richness of faith habit for the rest of our days.

In a moment, and each week, I am going to give us a chance to prayerfully reflect and examine our lives: not to establish a list of what we need to do, but to raise our awareness of what is possible. Lent is a time to listen for God's voice, affirming who we are, tending to the wounded places, and calling us to richer fuller life. In the rhythms of worship and praise, singing and praying, speaking and listening, may it be that we move toward the lives God imagines for us.

As I lead us, let us pray in the solitude of our hearts:

Let us each make a quiet place inside ourselves:

Holy God: May I have a sense of your presence in my silence.

If you have a word for me

a way to go,

a hand to hold,

a hope to bear,

may it come to the place I am making for it, even now.

Amen.

Often Lent and a six week commitment can be challenging. When it is let us consider these words, quoting Frederick Buechner again, "All in all, [Lent] can be a pretty depressing business, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter, may be at the end." May it be so for us.