
Failing Lent

**A Lenten Meditation from the *Cathedral Times*
By Canon Cathy Zappa**

Many of us have given something up for Lent, like sweets, alcohol, caffeine, or Facebook. Others have taken on a new spiritual discipline: spiritual reading, more time in prayer, a new form of exercise, or a new practice like journaling or meditation.

When we approach these disciplines with the right spirit, they can breathe fresh air into our spiritual lives, teach us about our addictions and idols, and help us make more room for God. But what is this “right” spirit?

Well, I can tell you what it’s not. For years, I approached Lent as a test of my spiritual fitness. I saw it as a time to prove myself and beat back temptation, myself. Some years, this meant taking on something small that I knew I could handle on my own, with no help from God or anyone else. More often, however, I would take on some ambitious self-improvement regimen designed to move me closer to perfection; and I would throw myself into it, not taking the time to pay attention to what was happening inside of me or to pray for help. It just seemed so much easier to take matters into my own hands than to surrender myself into God’s. It seemed so much safer to save myself than to trust that Jesus had already done that for me.

It will come as no surprise to you that I failed a time or two. Or twenty. One of those times, a few years ago, when I’d blown it yet again, I had a revelation. Just as I was deciding to give up altogether, again, I heard these words: “It’s ok to fail.” As these words slowly sunk in, Lent was completely transfigured before my eyes. And so was failure.

I saw that Christ never commanded me to be perfect, but simply to love and follow and return to God every time I wandered away; and my failures served those purposes far better than my successes did. Perhaps my most successful Lents were actually the ones when I failed at my chosen discipline! Those failures slowed me down, interrupted my project of self-justification, and led to real, hard, self-examination. They helped me discern Christ, standing there with me every time I fell, waiting to pull me up and dust me off and encourage me to try again. It was my failures, not my successes, that forced me to call on God, and trust in God’s grace.

That, I believe, is the real object of Lent and of our disciplines: learning to trust God, all over again—to trust that God has already conquered sin and death, and that God already loves us. This trust frees us to love others, and ourselves, even in our weakness. It frees us to fail and to recognize even in that the gift of God’s love and mercy.