“Live life to the fullest!” We hear this message everywhere in our culture, and we’re exhorted by advertisements and slogans, teachers and coaches to “Go for it!” We admire those who embrace the journey with a spirit of adventure, who live with boldness, gusto and passion. Why, even Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full!” John 10:10

And then we come to Lent. We don’t mean a season of darkness, withholding, or diminishing returns that’s imposed on us. Seasons, we may attribute to the havoc of sin in the world, or perhaps to the pruning work of a sovereign God. No, we mean a season that we enter willingly, even intentionally, as active participants in the spiritual dynamic at work when we do so.

What would otherwise feel like a constraint becomes restraint — holy restraint. As a spiritual practice, it’s something we engage in, not for its own sake as if it is somehow more holy in and of itself to restrain. The apostle Paul, when writing of eating or not eating food sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 10, notes that neither eating nor refraining from eating food sacrificed to idols has merit in and of itself. What makes an action holy is the intent behind it and the engagement with God in it.

Holy restraint — more precisely, holy self-restraint, since it’s something we put on ourselves rather than on others — is a deliberate holding back of our words and our effort for the sake of leaving more room in which to notice God. It is not a disengagement of the heart, soul or mind, as if we stop caring about who or what we’re present to. When done well and in humility, it allows for others to engage for themselves directly with God’s heart. And it humbles our own gifts — words of wisdom, acts of strength, etc. — so that we grow in trusting God. We trust that what he has brought to our attention is something he is already doing in or for us and that he will reveal it to us directly in his own time.

Jesus practiced holy restraint. When the woman caught in adultery was brought before him, instead of preaching a sermon or seizing the teaching opportunity, he quietly broke eye contact and scribbled in the sand at the crowd’s feet. The consequence? Instead of hiding behind personally safe theological debate or judiciary argumentation, those who are gathered each heard the inner conviction of the Holy Spirit. Several months later, when Jesus himself was on trial, he spoke very little and did even less, restraining himself not only in word but in powerful action. Certainly there were occasions when he did speak, preach, heal and command the wind and waves with a shout, but he knew when to unleash and when to restrain, and both are in the Spirit and thus holy.

As we journey the Lenten way these next few weeks, let us travel trustingly with Jesus to the holy restraint of the Cross and find there fullness of life indeed!

We are invited to identify with Jesus, whose word and power created the universe, and who, through his humble self-restraint, is exalted above all, in this practice of holy restraint.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing … to the glory of God the Father.

— Philippians 2:5-11

Oh, brothers and sisters, let us beware! Unless we make the increase of humility our study, we may find that we have been delighting in beautiful thoughts and feelings, in solemn acts of consecration and faith, while the only sure mark of the presence of God—the disappearance of self—was missing the entire time. Come and let us flee to Jesus, and hide ourselves in Him until we are clothed with His humility. That alone is our holiness.

— Andrew Murray
At the name of Jesus, Every knee shall bow,
Every tongue confess Him King of glory now;
’Tis the Father’s pleasure We should call Him Lord,
Who from the beginning Was the mighty Word.

Humbled for a season, To receive a name
From the lips of sinners, Unto whom He came,
Faithfully He bore it Spotless to the last,
Brought it back victorious, When from death He passed.

Bore it up triumphant, With its human light,
Through all ranks of creatures, To the central height,
To the throne of Godhead, To the Father’s breast;
Filled it with the glory Of that perfect rest.

Christians, this Lord Jesus Shall return again,
With His Father’s glory O’er the earth to reign;
For all wreaths of empire Meet upon His brow,
And our hearts confess Him King of glory now.

• When praying with others, try expressing your prayer simply by saying, “Lord, I hold [the concern] before you,” and refrain from using more words. What do you notice?

• Try eating a communal meal in silence. What goes on in your heart and mind that’s about you? What goes on in your heart and mind that’s about the others? What goes on in your heart and mind that’s about your awareness of God’s presence?

• Identify a practice that you tend to do with an extravagance of energy, such as posting on social media sites, grocery shopping, exercising, etc. Try doing it with restraint. What do you notice about yourself and about God?

• When you voluntarily refrain from offering words of wisdom, counsel or exhortation, or from having the last word no matter how godly it is, what goes on in your heart and mind? What do you notice that is false or sinful that you might need to put to death? What do you have to trust God with?

• Besides restraining from words, what else do you tend to offer to others that might become an opportunity for practicing holy restraint? Is there something about your gifts, your calling or the way in which you tend to interact that might evoke pridefulness? In this holy restraint, what goes on between you and God?

A Prayer of Illumination:

Lord Jesus Christ, who humbled yourself, even unto death, so that we would be given fullness of life by your Spirit and in your Father’s love, grant us humility in word and deed, that in the discipline of holy restraint we, and those with whom we companion would better hear your voice and see your ways to the glory of your name. Amen.

SUGGESTED SPIRITUAL FORMATION RESOURCES

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, by Benedicta Ward
The Way of the Heart, by Henri Nouwen