

# Almsgiving

## A LENTEN TRADITION

*Gifts of mercy—alms—aren't given because of our mercy for others, but only because Christ has had mercy on us.*

by Tom Ries

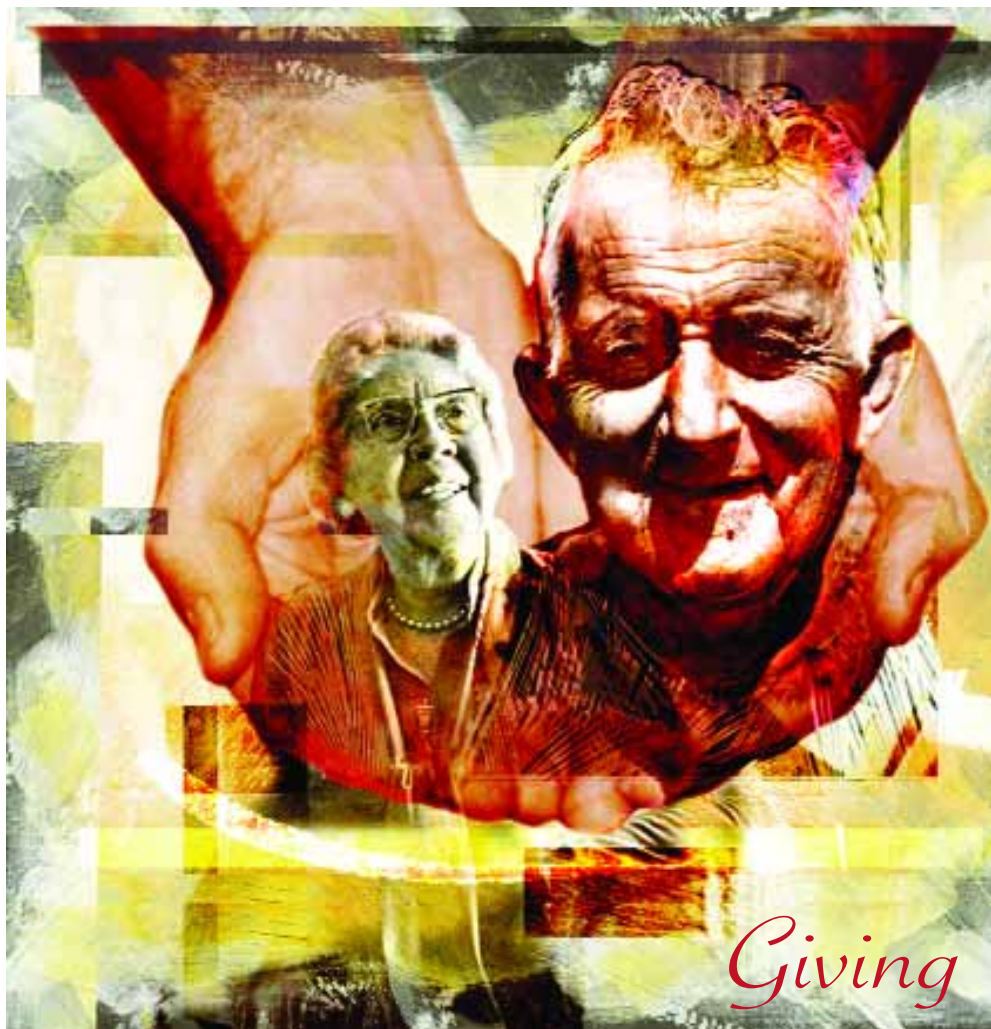
**A**lmsgiving is one of three traditional disciplines in the church's observance of Lent. The other two are prayer and fasting. These long-standing customs are not required of Christians, but they have been used by believers in Christ during the Lenten season for centuries as ways of remembering Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

There are no prescribed methods for exercising these traditions, but many Christians find ways of practicing them during the 40-day period before Easter.

The historic Gospel for Ash Wednesday is Matt. 6:1–6 and 16–21. It was chosen specifically for that day because Jesus comments on these three Lenten disciplines:

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may



be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues

and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to

show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

The common theme in Jesus’ comments on each of these disciplines is His caution against a public display of piety when practicing them. The three disciplines were a healthy part of the Jewish religious

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tradition of Jesus’ day. The Book of Tobit says: “Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and righteousness.” (The Book of Tobit, or Tobias, is part of the Catholic and the Orthodox Old Testament, but is regarded as apocryphal by Protestants. It tells of a God-fearing Jew named Tobit, living in Nineveh about 700 B.C.)

Nevertheless, the Old Testament practice of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting carried over to the Christian Church. No one knows exactly when these disciplines became associated with the Lenten season, but there are references as early as the fourth century linking them to the remembrance of Christ’s passion.

A quick search of the Internet indicates that there is renewed interest today among Lutheran Christians in practicing spiritual discipline as part of their Lenten observance. But as with any spiritual discipline, these three carried with them the risk of becoming legalistic rituals. And, as with any legalistic ritual, there is the tendency for the practitioner to draw



## *Fasting*

attention to her or his own virtue.

Jesus’ words concerning almsgiving are not a directive or an excuse for His followers to think, “My giving is no one’s business but my own.” In fact, examples of faith-motivated stewardship are lifted up throughout the Scriptures. Offerings by individuals for the building of the original temple are recorded as positive examples in the Old Testament (1 Ch. 29:1–9).

As Jesus watched at the temple as worshipers deposited their gifts into the treasury, He commented that the widow who gave two small coins

gave the greatest gift (Luke 21:1–4).

And in 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul publicly acknowledged the gifts of the Macedonians who pleaded with him for the opportunity to participate in the collection.

But in the matter of giving alms, Jesus advises modesty and privacy.

Martin Chemnitz gave a thorough treatment of almsgiving in his comments on poverty in his *Loci Communes* (system of theology). According to Chemnitz, almsgiving does not encompass the whole of an individual Christian’s life of stewardship, but rather refers specifically to

“gifts of mercy,” given by those who have to those who have not. These gifts of mercy are not gifts motivated by the mercy or pity that the giver has for the receiver. Rather they are gifts motivated by the mercy of Christ present in the life of the giver.

Chemnitz emphasizes this point by noting that a word in the Hebrew Old Testament for “gifts of mercy” is *tsedaqoth*, meaning “righteous-

“Some congregations have introduced midweek suppers for those who attend the midweek evening services. Perhaps one of these meals might emphasize fasting and

Church, Cleveland, Tenn., carries the following pre-Lenten message:

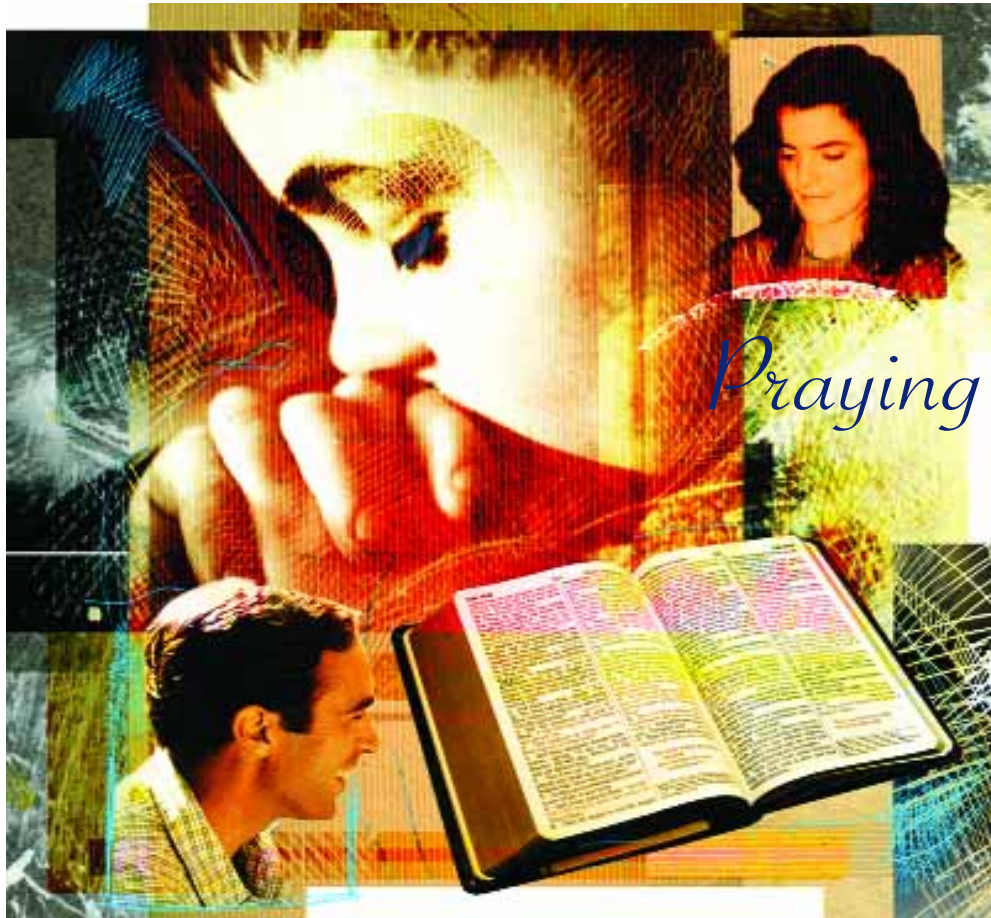
“Lent is a time during which God’s baptized people cleanse their hearts through the discipline of

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ness” (see Ezekiel 18). Almsgiving is a joyous yet quiet act of expressing the righteousness that the giver has received from God, by grace, through faith. The giver shares his abundance with those in need.

While almsgiving certainly stands on its own as an expression of the grace of God in the life of the believer, the Lenten practice of almsgiving is not meant to be considered aside from the other disciplines of prayer and fasting. Still, the focus of each of these Lenten disciplines—or any Lenten practice, or for that matter, any other liturgical or ecclesiastical tradition—is not the practice itself, but the grace of Jesus Christ who “though he was rich yet for your sakes became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:8b).

How might almsgiving, prayer, and fasting be part of our Lenten experience today? In his book *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, Dr. Timothy Maschke suggests how the Lenten disciplines might be observed by a congregation:



almsgiving. Either a sparse amount of food may be offered or a menu that features fare from a country in which the congregation supports mission work. A freewill offering could be collected for missions. ... Vespers or Compline [night prayer] provide meaningful Lenten worship services for the gathered guests, particularly if the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is not offered at the midweek service.”

Another way is for congregations simply to call attention to these historic disciplines so that individual members might think about how to express them personally during their own Lenten journeys. The Web site of First Lutheran

Lent, described as repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Lent is a time during which God’s people prepare with joy for the Paschal Feast. Lent is a time during which God renews His people’s zeal in faith and life.”

Regardless of our individual or congregational Lenten practices, the theme of the season is indeed to prepare to celebrate with joy the Paschal Feast of the Lamb.



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