

### LIGHTENING UP

“Hi, I’m Marie Osman, and I’ve lost 50 pounds on the Yakkety-Yak Diet. And I’m looking pretty hot now. Don’t you wish you looked like this?”

Have you seen this one?

“Oh, that’s nothing, Marie,” says another. “I’m Tom, and I’ve lost over 65 pounds on the same diet.”

“Heck, I’ve got you both beat,” says a third. “I’m Willie, and I’ve lost almost half my body weight over the time I’ve been on this diet. Why look at these jeans that I used to wear; I can put my whole body into one of the pants legs now!”

It seems like this commercial is a regular feature of every evening’s “Nightly News.” Apparently the companies marketing these various diet plans think that the average TV-watchers for that half-hour of news predictably are struggling with their BMI numbers (you know, Body Mass Index?). It looks to me that they figure that this is the demographic that could most benefit from shedding a few pounds.

In all fairness, though, I will concede that it is not an especially good idea to be moving through life heavier than is necessary. Any medical doctor will tell you that. That’s why they’ve devised that BMI-thing--to keep us personally chagrined by the amount of what Marie calls “unwanted body fat.” Thanks for that delicate reminder, Marie.

All this talk about body fat is making me a bit uncomfortable, so let’s switch the metaphor, and think about the problem here in different terms.

Imagine getting ready to start out on a hike.

You’ve got your fashionable, comfortable hiking gear on. You’ve got on two pairs of socks and laced up your sturdy boots. You are good to go . . . but not before strapping on your back pack, which is stuffed with bug spray, first aid kit, sleeping bag, pots and pans, folding chair, tent, kerosene lantern, and enough rations, canned goods, and bottled water to last you for twenty days. Now you’re ready! Let’s hit that trail!

What a sight you would be. Besides, hiking that heavy, I should think, would not be so pleasant or enjoyable an experience.

Alright, then, let’s imagine instead taking a road trip.

You’ve got the suitcases packed, and the car is gassed up and, if your bladder doesn’t explode first, you’re good for three hundred and fifty miles. You’re ready to pull out of the garage and be on your way to adventure . . . but not before shoving into the trunk space or loading onto the roof all the rest. You know, all that stuff that you could find that you need along the way--like every tool that you’ve got in the basement; cases of paper towels and toilet paper (you can never have too much of that, you know); all the sports equipment that you own (including your skis, even though you are going to visit the desert); and, while you’re at it, the riding mower, too (I think it’ll fit nicely up there in the center of the roof rack). There, now you’re ready! So, let’s head out onto that open highway!

What a sight that car would be. Surely, road-tripping that heavy would be a very complicated and onerous

thing.

I suppose you've figured out that I'm not really Marie Osman. I suppose, too, that you've figured out that, as repetitive as the commercials are, she's got a point: We could all benefit from losing some weight--and I'm not talking about body weight now.

I'm talking about all that heavy, old emotional stuff that we insist on dragging along behind us everywhere we go--every slight we have ever suffered, every grudge we have ever harbored, every hurt that we have ever endured, every injustice that has ever been visited upon us, every disappointment that we feel has diminished us. Isn't it fascinating: We can't remember what we had for breakfast yesterday, but we can recall with exacting detail some humiliation that we experienced twenty years ago?

Carrying that old stuff into everything that we do is just as absurd, just as unreasonable, just as untenable as hiking that heavy or road-tripping that heavy. In the more sane quarters of our brains, we know that that is true, but, more times than not, we insist on keeping it all there anyway--all that anger, all that sadness, all that resentment, all that guilt. What is the sick and twisted satisfaction that we derive from doing that? It is like so much excess baggage stuffed into our knapsacks or jammed onto our roof racks. No wonder we get so weary, so exhausted, so disgusted, so depressed.

You know, it's a real burden; that's what it is. A genuine burden. And God, it appears, loves nothing better than lifting and eliminating a good burden. Every time, God can be expected to rise to the occasion to help us to push that burdensome stuff out of our way. Every time, God can be predicted to do everything possible to motivate us to clear the space presently clogged by that burdensome stuff in the interest of creating an opening for something different, healthier, and new--something that makes better sense for us, something that will relieve and unfetter us, something that will release and empower us.

You heard the readings for this morning:

- God says to Moses, "I have heard the groaning of my people, and, if they will have it, I will deliver them from their burdens, and I will bring them to a new place, a place where they can live more freely and joyfully"; and
- God invites us through Jesus, "Come to me, you who are weary, carrying such heavy burdens. If you will have it, I will give you relief and rest, for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

In these are the actual meaning behind the repentance and self-denial aspects of the Lenten season. Such matters are not really about making us feel crappy about ourselves. There's already too much of that, and it's weighing us down, and it's slowing us up, and it's holding us back. Just as Marie is more or less encouraging, it's high time for some lightening-up on our parts.

You see, done rightly, life is heavy enough. In no way does it ever call for additional piling on.

If we will allow for it, Lent can be a time for our lightening up.

So, if you will have it . . . for you personally, what needs to go? What?