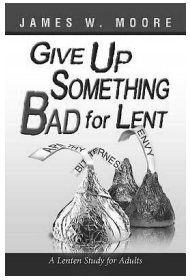

Week One
Give up Something Bad for Lent
Bishop Bruce R. Ough
2016 Lenten Study
Dakotas Conference of
The United Methodist Church

I am Bishop Bruce Ough and I am pleased to greet you as we enter the 40-day Season of Lent. This is a time of self-reflection, repentance and self-denial designed to prepare us for the celebration of Jesus' triumphant resurrection on Easter.

As we begin this journey, it is my privilege to introduce the Dakotas Cabinet Lenten study based on James Moore's book, *Give Up Something Bad for Lent*.

Rev. Moore reminds us that traditionally, Christians sacrificially give up something for Lent as a spiritual discipline and as an exercise in self-denial. This spiritual discipline imitates Jesus' own self-denial and sacrificial love and is intended to turn us toward God – and the ways of God.

Rev. Moore raises the provocative question: If I am going to practice the discipline of self-denial, why not give up something that I really need to get out of my life permanently? Why not choose, with the help of God, to give up actions, attitudes, habits or sins that have the power to contaminate, infect, poison or rob my soul and deny me abundant life? Things like bitterness, apathy, gossip, self-pity, envy or blaming. For me, this list of bad things to give up is quite long!

This idea of giving up bad or destructive actions and attitudes is a Biblical idea. Jesus instructed his disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. (Matthew 16:24) Jesus is teaching us to get rid of those things in our lives that prevent us from walking where Jesus
leads -- that prevent us from reflecting the Light of Christ.

One of the traditional Biblical texts for Ash Wednesday – the first day of Lent – is the passage from the prophet Joel in which God commands the Judeans to rend their hearts and return to God:

> Rend your hearts and not your clothing.
> Return to the Lord, your God,
> For he is gracious and merciful…
> Joel 2:13a

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases this verse in more contemporary words:

> Change your life, not your clothes.
> Come back to God, your God.

Self-denial and repentance involve both changing one's life and coming back to God. Giving up something we enjoy for Lent – something that does not permanently change us – is like changing or rending our clothes. Giving up the destructive, life-draining things for Lent changes our heart – our life – and returns us to God.

Such changing and returning is a deliberate act of will on our part. Repentance requires great effort. Giving up something truly bad or destructive often involves wrenching pain. Jesus made this bluntly and absolutely clear in the Sermon on th Mount when he taught his disciples – and us – to tear out, cut off and throw away those parts of us that cause us to sin. (Matthew 5:29-30)

Rending our hearts and returning to God – changing our lives and coming to God giving up bad things and receiving the Easter victory – cannot be done apart from the help of our gracious and compassionate God – a God who is zealous to pursue us, woo us, love us, save us, resurrect us.

I pray that as you journey toward the cross and the Easter celebration, you will embrace the mystery and truth of Lent:

- ***It is in self-denial that we discover our true, God-created selves.***
- ***It is in surrender that we discover victory.***
- ***It is in sacrificial love that we discover how extravagantly we are loved.***
- ***It is in giving up that which his bad and destructive that we discover abundant life.***
- ***It is in rending our hearts that we discover the full measure of God's love and mercy.***

May God grant you a blessed, life-transforming Lenten journey.