***SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: FASTING***

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Texts: Luke 4:1-13 and Matthew 6:16-18

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, our annual forty-day pilgrimage to the cross in anticipation of Easter’s dawn. It is a season of preparation marked by a variety of spiritual practices that have been found significant to Christians over the centuries. Across these next several weeks, we will explore some of those practices in sermons and Sunday School classes, but we hope too that you may experiment with some of them during the week as we prepare our hearts and minds to recall the grim reality of Jesus’ crucifixion and the joyful news of his resurrection. Today we begin this journey with an ancient practice: fasting.

Let me be clear from the start: fasting is not dieting and dieting is not fasting! There is no South Beach fast or paleo fast! You diet in order to lose weight or improve your health; fasting has a different goal. As Richard Foster puts it in his classic book *Celebration of Discipline*:

*Throughout Scripture fasting refers to*

*abstaining from food for spiritual purposes*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

While there may (or may not) be similarities in practice to dieting, there is a vastly different goal in fasting. It is denying yourself food in order to enhance an awareness of God’s presence or to draw yourself closer to God. As John Calvin notes:

*God does not greatly esteem fasting of itself, unless an inner emotion of the heart is present, and true displeasure at one’s sin, true humility, and true sorrowing arising from the fear of God*. [[2]](#endnote-2)

In other words, fasting is not just about your stomach; it is a holistic activity that involves body, mind, and spirit – all centered on your relationship with God from whom all your blessings flow, including food for your body and soul!

Fasting’s roots run deep into the Old Testament. Often it is associated with repentance and confession:

*The people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth,*

*and with earth on their heads*, writes Nehemiah

*Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication*

*with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.*

*I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession*, says Daniel.

*Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart,*

*with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;*

*rend your hearts and not your clothing*, says the prophet Joel.

*My knees are weak through fasting;*

*my body has become gaunt*, sings the psalmist.

Fasting, often linked with sackcloth and repentance, evidences deep remorse and sincere repentance. By giving up food the ones fasting deny themselves something precious – food for their bodies – and the hunger pangs make them aware of their miserable state, a state in which they find themselves through their own sins and errors. There is something visceral in fasting as body and spirit share in repentance and prayer. Hunger is the gnawing reminder of dependence upon God for the most basic of necessities.

Fasting is not just an Old Testament practice as you heard in our Gospel readings this morning. Jesus fasts in the wilderness as he is tempted by the devil. “*Command this stone to become a loaf of bread*,” urges the devil, tempting Jesus to use his divine power to satisfy his very human need. “*One does not live by bread alone*,” replies Jesus; and what goes unspoken in Luke’s account but is inferred in Jesus’ reply is the rest of that verse Jesus was quoting, “*One lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God*.” Fasting reminds us that as much as we need food, we need God more! It was part of Jesus’ preparation for ministry there in the wilderness after his baptism. Following Jesus’ example, fasting was practiced in the early church as we hear Luke describe a gathering of prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch:

*While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

In these instances, fasting is not a daily routine, but a particular practice that is observed at a particular time – in preparation for ministry, in ordination, in repentance, in a season like Lent!

Yet Jesus is aware that there is a danger that fasting can become a self-serving practice. Giving up food can tempt us to make ourselves into self-righteous martyrs who want others to see how holy we are. It is for that reason that he warns the people not to put their fasting on public display, but to practice it privately. Fasting may be difficult personally, but our face to the public should be cheerful, for the one to whom we turn our attention in fasting is not our neighbor, but God. Nothing about our fasting should shout to the world, “*Look at me – how pious and holy I am as I suffer in hunger!*” Only to God should our fasting words be uttered, and they should amount to this: “*Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner*.” For as John Calvin emphatically notes:

*God abominates nothing more than when men try to disguise themselves by displaying signs and outward appearances in place of innocence of heart.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

In other words, intentions matter, and God knows our intentions!

With all that said about the purpose of fasting, what is it in practice? Is it giving up all food for these forty days or is something less a possibility? There is no rulebook on fasting that spells out the dos and don’ts. That makes a couple of alternatives possible. One might be a total fast, as biblical figures did, for a set amount of time – a day perhaps, or at lunchtime one day a week – while still drinking water. Perhaps you might fast all day Wednesday and then break the fast at our soup and bread meal in the Great Hall or in a simple meal at home in which you remember those who are hungry that night. Or you might give up a meal one day a week – lunch perhaps – as a way of reminding yourself of this Lenten season. Or perhaps you give up some food that is near or dear to your heart these forty days – something you like, not raw liver or pickled prunes – but something you might miss day to day. And each time you miss it, you remember why you are missing it – as an intentional fast – and give a word of thanks to God. Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness, but we are not Jesus. We need to eat more often than every forty days, especially those of us with diabetes or other dietary issues. So choose a fasting practice that works for you – not only for your body chemistry but also for your spiritual life, a fast that draws you nearer to God.

*When the stomach is full, it is easy to talk of fasting*,[[4]](#endnote-4) wrote St. Jerome in the early centuries of the church. Contemplating fasting is easy for us to do this day with full bellies. But I can’t help wondering about the men, women, and children fleeing Ukraine or those trapped in cities under siege who are enduring forced fasts this day, those who are crying to God for deliverance from hunger and from Russian bombs or bullets, those who are searching for peace and hope amidst the carnage of war. We fast because we have food to give up; many of them do not have that luxury this day. Perhaps in our fasting this Lenten season, we might remember them in our prayers; as we go without food for a moment or a meal, we might ask God for peace, for protection, and for mercy for them.

There is yet another fasting possibility this Lent - fasting from things. It works only if giving up such things for this season makes you more aware of God’s presence and draws you closer to God. Some have suggested fasting from social media – which only works if you are regularly on social media – or fasting from video games or screens that regularly take your time and attention. In the time that you give up such a practice, you might consider taking something on – like saying a prayer, writing a letter to a friend, or reading a Lenten devotional. After the Monday Bible Study and our discussion of fasting, someone was kind enough to forward to me these thoughts on fasting in the words of Pope Francis:

*DO YOU WANT TO FAST THIS LENT?*

*Fast from hurting words and say kind words.*

*Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.*

*Fast from anger and be filled with patience.*

*Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope,*

*Fast from worries and have trust in God.*

*Fast from complaints; contemplate simplicity.*

*Fast from pressures and be prayerful.*

*Fast from bitterness; fill your hearts with joy.*

*Fast from selfishness and be compassionate.*

*Fast from grudges and be reconciled.*

*Fast from words; be silent and listen.*

Some of you might add, “*Fast from long sermons; just sleep*.” But from whatever you fast, be sure that it draws you closer to God, that you fill the space made empty by the fast with something holy and faithful and good.

Today we come to this table to be filled with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Here we draw closer to God, not by denying ourselves food, but by taking and eating in remembrance of our risen Lord. Here our fast is broken at the invitation of One who showed us how to fast faithfully by resisting temptation and living faithfully day after day after day. May your fast, whatever it may be, be as faithful! Amen

1. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Harper & Row:1988, p.48 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV.xii.19, Westminster Press:1960 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Id. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. St. Jerome, *Letter 58* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)