

The Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018
Mark 1:9-15

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Inward Practice: Fasting

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

First—as I will do each time—a few reminders about spiritual practices:

- 1) Beginners are welcome.
- 2) Not everyone will be drawn to any particular practice.
- 3) These practices are not necessary to faith. And they are not requirements.

The spiritual practice under consideration today is fasting. In retrospect, it might have been better to shift the schedule for these spiritual practice reflections a bit, since it was last Sunday that we read of Jesus going into the wilderness for a fast of forty days. Like the forty-day fasts of Moses and Elijah, these fasts must be considered supernatural. The human body cannot survive much more than a three day absolute fast. Here's Matthew's version of what we read from Mark last week:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.
(4:1-2)

As my mother used to say, "Better late than never." And so, we belatedly take a look at this practice of Jesus—fasting. The significance of those forty days for Jesus should not be lost on us. We take our cue from his time in the wilderness preparing for his ministry as a standard for Lent. We engage every year in the forty day fast of Lent in order to prepare ourselves for the feast of Easter. That feast, by the way, lasts for a full fifty days, ending with Pentecost. I suppose it is a nod to the joys of the Christian life that we fast for significantly longer than we fast.

The fact is that fasting is referred to quite often throughout scripture. Simply put, it is the practice of abstaining from all or some kinds of food or drink for spiritual purposes—at least in a Christian context. Fasting is a part of many different religions as well as a practice done for various other reasons, including health.

In a cultural landscape dotted with shrines marked with golden arches and an assortment of Pizza temples, fasting may seem rather out of place and out of step with the times. In fact, fasting was for many years in general disrepute both in and outside the Church. But in recent years, there has been renewed interest.

Way back when I was an intern at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Baraboo, Wisconsin, I made it a practice to fast on my day off every week. Even back then, I took Fridays off rather than the usual Monday for pastors. It gave me a sense of being part of the weekend that others enjoyed, especially when I also didn't have responsibilities on Saturday.

I found that fasting was beneficial in drawing my attention away from my physical needs and more towards those of the spirit. I found that, with careful attention to staying hydrated, I could enjoy the day, including long walks in that beautiful part of the country. And it was always fun to break the fast at sundown, having started to fast on Thursday evening. It's something that I have continued to do since on occasion.

While it was a matter of practicality for me, Friday being my day off, fasting on Fridays has a long history. I was surprised to learn that Roman Catholics still fast on Fridays. Here's a bit of canon law. "All Fridays of the year are days of penance. All persons who are aged fourteen or older are bound by the law of abstinence on all Fridays that are not feast days, while the law of fasting binds all Catholics who are aged between eighteen and sixty on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. There is some flexibility related to substituting charitable acts for abstinence from meat on Fridays, except Good Friday; but avoiding meat remains a common practice, especially during Lent. We've all seen the continued popularity of the Friday fish fry, and even McDonalds was inspired by the practice to create the "Filet-O-Fish" sandwich.

For Lutherans and other Protestants, fasting in Lent slowly became a time for giving up foods of particular richness (such as meats, fatty foods like doughnuts, and chocolate). I remember the struggle it was for me to give up pizza several years ago—admittedly a shallow, if difficult, choice. I much prefer the twenty-four hour liquid fast to the one prohibiting only meat. For me, that kind of fast helps me overcome what I have come to think of as the tyranny of food. So much of my time is spent thinking about, preparing, and eating food. The refrigerator and the freezer and the cupboards are always full. Good restaurants abound here in Bloomington. Temptation is ever present. And wherever I go, it seems, there is food there for the taking—even at Worship Committee meetings! And, please note, you Worship Committee people; I am not trying to alter that beloved tradition. Tuesdays, after all, are not my days for fasting.

The point is that food seems to be everywhere these days. And it is personally and spiritually refreshing on occasion to avoid its tyranny and meditate on other matters.

This is truly what Lent attempts to do for us. Have you noticed that post-communion prayer? I love it.

Sustain us in our Lenten pilgrimage: may our fasting be hunger for justice, our alms, a making of peace, and our prayer, the song of grateful hearts.

So, fasting may take many forms—something that’s true for all of the spiritual practices. Fasting is not a law, it is a gracious opportunity that we may shape according to our schedules, our judgments, and our creativity. There is no place in scripture that commands regular fasting. It is a matter of choice for the sake of whatever purposes an individual decides are worthwhile.

Some suggest that Jesus is calling for fasting in the Sermon on the Mount. It’s in the passage from Matthew we read every Ash Wednesday.

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.* (6:16-19)

Far from being required here, Jesus is clearly instructing those who choose to fast regarding its proper observance. Fasting is not intended for show, but for nurturing one’s spirit and connecting more fully with God.

Here are some of the traditional guides to the proper exercise of fasting:

First, fasting is intended to center on God. Fasting may be used for other purposes, but fasting as a spiritual practice is a form of worship or even of prayer. The gospel of Luke speaks of this when describing Anna: “She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.” (2:37). The same thing is implied in a story about the church at Antioch in the book of Acts: “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit (spoke to them).” (13:2). Fasting and worship are linked.

A secondary purpose of fasting is to expose those things that control us. In removing what may be an obstacle to self-understanding, such as food, we may realize that we were covering up something inside us. Removing food for a time can help us to become more aware of deeper matters. David wrote, “I humbled my soul with fasting” in Psalm 69:10. Fasting revealed to David that his zeal for the Lord’s house had consumed him. It was a path to understanding. Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if these are in us, they may surface in times of fasting. And we may seek the leadings of the Spirit for ways to address them.

Third, fasting reminds us that we are ultimately sustained not by food but “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4). God, not food, is our ultimate sustenance. So one way to look at fasting is not as abstaining from food so much as feasting on the word of God. Fasting as feasting. Who knew?

When the disciples bring lunch to Jesus, he declares “I have food to eat of which you do not know...My food is to do the will of the One who sent me, and to accomplish God’s work.” (John 4:32, 34). If fasting is experienced as a burden rather than a blessing, it’s time to consider other spiritual practices. For fasting is meant to involve feasting of a deeper kind.

Finally, fasting helps us to keep or to restore balance in life. It’s all too easy to allow nonessentials in life to take precedence. How quickly we crave things we don’t need until we are enslaved or controlled by them. Paul writes, “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.” (1 Cor. 6:12). Our cravings and desires can be like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting can help to keep them in their proper channels. In the fourth century Asterius said that fasting ensured that the stomach would not make the body boil like a kettle to the hindering of the soul.

Those who have engaged often in this spiritual practice of fasting speak of many possible side benefits, other than worship. These include increased effectiveness in intercessory prayer, guidance in decisions, better concentration, physical well-being, and inspiration. But again, these are not primary purposes for the practice. Fasting is a chosen act of self-denial for the sake of honoring God and growing in grace. Whatever else may come is considered a synergy or serendipity.

Rather than offer specific guidance for fasting, I’ll suggest that you do some reading on the matter. There are many resource available.

I do hope that you give fasting a try during Lent, perhaps making it a regular practice. It is at least worthy of some experimentation. And I consider it especially relevant in a society like ours that is so fraught with things and foods and activities. Foregoing one or more of our regular pleasures is a useful way both to focus more on God and as a way to better appreciate our abundance.

May your fasts be times of worship, blessing, and inspiration. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.

[Based on Richard J. Foster’s “Celebration of Discipline”]