

14 February 2018

Ash Wednesday: “You Call That Fasting?”

Isaiah 58:1-12

We read now words addressed to the people of Jerusalem, worshiping in a newly rebuilt temple after the exile. The reading is found in Isaiah 58, verse 1-12:

*58 Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.
3 ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.
4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;*

*your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
10 if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
11 The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

I practice fasting. Nothing especially long or impressive, but two or three times a month, I go twenty-four hours without food, from supper one night until supper the next night. During that day, usually, I am more or less aware of the fact that I'm hungry, which reminds me that my own desires are not always paramount, and I use that awareness as a reminder to pray for others. When this practice starts to become routine – that is, when it stops serving as a reminder to pray – then I give it up for a year or two.

Now, we live in the nation of super-sized fast food and portion size inflation, so fasting might feel a little foreign, but in a larger context, what I do is an extremely mild version of a very ordinary spiritual discipline. Every religious tradition has a place for fasting. Within Christianity, Jesus fasted, Paul fasted, Peter fasted, monks and hermits and ascetics fasted, John Wesley fasted and called on his followers to fast regularly as a “means of Grace.” So, as we begin the season of Lent – where traditionally we adopt some form of self-discipline – I thought I'd mention it. Along with daily prayer, regular gathering for worship, reading and studying scripture, and other disciplines of the Christian life, fasting can be meaningful.

Or not. In fact, usually not. We Christians, historically, have shown a tremendous gift for destroying the meaning, substance, and usefulness of spiritual disciplines, and no discipline illustrates this better than fasting. One way we ruin fasting is by making it all about us – doing it in order to meet our own goals rather than to draw closer to God. I have seen fasting promoted as a Christian weight loss method. Grow closer to God, *and* get a bikini body in time for swimsuit season. Or once I had a woman earnestly explain to me that what she most loved about fasting

was how much time it freed up. “You never realize how much time we waste every day cooking and eating and cleaning up. I get *so* much more done when I fast.” And, you know, she’s right. But I’m pretty sure that the spiritual discipline of fasting is supposed to mean more than working through lunch. If we pursue a spiritual discipline for the sake of completing some project of our own, then we are, you might say, unclear on the concept.

Another way we corrupt spiritual disciplines is by chipping away at them, tweaking this detail, redefining that detail, until we get rid of all those icky, hard discipline-y parts and make them more pleasant. Again, fasting is a great example. Early in the history of the Christian Church, it was established that all people should fast on Fridays. But that’s, you know, hard. So that was modified for general use. Now it wasn’t total fasting. You just weren’t supposed to eat meat. But that was a little hard, too. I mean, what if we don’t *like* just vegetables. So it was decided that fish didn’t count as meat, which made it all right to eat on Friday, which is how we ended up with the weird situation we have now, where Friday Night Fish Fry, the best meal of the week, *technically* counts as fasting. In fact, some places offer Friday seafood buffets, so you can fast until you’re stuffed.

Third, even when we do them as intended, we tend to ruin spiritual disciplines by getting smug about being *so* holy. This has apparently been a real problem for fasting. We saw it in our reading from Isaiah 58, where God says, “Is this the fast that I want? Bowing your head like a bulrush in oppressive humility, then rolling around in attention-seeking sackcloth and ashes? Really?” Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount: “When you fast, don’t go around acting glum so people can see. Keep it to yourself. Otherwise, you’re wasting your time.” Both Isaiah and Jesus express frustration at “spiritual” discipline done to attract earthly admiration.

It’s almost as if we can’t be trusted with our own spiritual growth, you know? One way or another we end up making every spiritual discipline about ourselves. Is there any way for us to approach a spiritual discipline without corrupting it? How?

By making it about other people. And here we turn back to Isaiah 58.

*⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

*⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

It sounds a little weird to refer to feeding the hungry and clothing the naked as “fasting,” but here’s the connection. When fasting is done right, in the right spirit, what it does is remind us that our wants and appetites are not as important as we usually make them. Fasting is a way of restoring perspective, primarily the perspective that our desires are not the center of the universe.

This is why Isaiah and Jesus express such frustration about fasting pursued for selfish motives. Fasting to meet your own needs is not just bad fasting; it's the opposite of fasting.

But – you know what? – there's an even better way of reminding ourselves that it's not all about us. Serve others. Become a part of others' lives, seek to meet their needs. And that method's *way* more effective than just skipping a few meals. If you want to develop God's perspective in your life, then the best way to go about it is to show love to others. *Then* maybe you can think about things like fasting or pilgrimages or whatever. You want a spiritual discipline? Maybe we can start with the discipline of focusing on someone else's needs.

So, after a service devoted to confessing our sins to God and one another and receiving the mark of God's forgiveness, we want to close with an opportunity to fast in this way. At each door is a basket, and we invite you to leave a donation there. All the money we gather tonight, we will take with us this Saturday when our church has its turn serving at the Community Table. Tonight's offering will accompany that day of cooking and serving and cleaning as a financial support to that ministry for feeding the hungry. So as we leave today, and as we seek God through this Lenten season, let's fast in this way.