

Ancient Christian Practices: Fasting

Isaiah 58:6-9; Matthew 6:16-18

This morning I begin a sermon series that I will continue for the remaining Sundays of the Lenten season. The series is called “Ancient Christian Practices for Today.” Since Lent is a reflective season in the Christian tradition as we follow Jesus on his final journey to Jerusalem and Palm Sunday, I suggest we reacquaint ourselves with practices that have given Christians over time sustenance and wisdom and courage for the facing of our own days. I am talking here about practices such as praying, fasting, generous giving, Sabbath time, healing, hospitality and discernment. They are all practices Jesus himself observed. These were, for Jesus, ways he stayed in deep communion with God whom he called “Abba” or “Father,” and also the way he practiced his amazing love with friends, family, strangers and even enemies.

On the other hand, Jesus was suspicious of spiritual practices done for public show or for inner heroism. Sack-cloth and tattoo-like ashes, showy sacrifices, over-the-top mourning and repenting one’s sins, ostentatious praying, bony fasting, and Sabbath Day policing were common and seem to have pushed Jesus in the opposite direction. While others were going about looking “spiritual,” Jesus would be dancing, drinking, eating, healing on the Sabbath and gaining a reputation as a heathen, a glutton and a drunkard. At least, so his enemies said.

Jesus seems to have had a knack – a God-given gift! – for what is truly helpful at any given time: when to fast and when to eat; when to pray and when to act; when to dance and when to mourn; when to give and when to receive; when to speak and when to be silent; when to keep rules and when to break them.

Grounded in God, he was free to choose, and he always chose *love over fear*. He made even the cross, that death instrument, a symbol of conquering love!

I bring the practices back to us this Lenten season because I believe the question of *what is truly helpful* is haunting. We live in such conflicted times! It is so challenging to know how to be and what to do. As Christians we assume that there is a set of absolute rules – *what would Jesus do?* And those Jesus rules should settle it! Well.....OK. What did Jesus do that you might emulate? Have you ever forgiven an enemy as Jesus did? Have you often refused to condemn? Do you know how to move on when others beg you to stay or stay when others beg you to move on? How often have you stood with the accused? Can you let the dead bury the dead? Can you hold back where others rush in so the real work of love can begin? Have you ever *really* considered the lilies – are you prepared to trust God's love in all things? Is it really so simple to do what Jesus did?

The ancient practices bring us back to the question of what is truly helpful – what has always been helpful – what Jesus came to show us: *how to choose love over fear*. Take, for example, the practice of *fasting*. For those of us here who come from a Catholic background, fasting was a common practice of that church. Some of you remember fish on Fridays? That was a form of fasting from meat. Some of you to this day routinely fast from some food during the seasons of Advent and Lent. Orthodox Christians observe a rigorous fast throughout Lent that leaves them famished by Easter morning! Other traditions fast before big decisions – conversion or baptism or reconciliation – in order to get clear on choices. Our own UCC tradition has never been big on fasting – perhaps because fasting sometimes sounds like a form of punishment: *You're such a sinner you need to fast until you see your sins and accept your punishment!* What an unlovely thing to do! Is this what Jesus did? I don't think so!

But fasting can be so much more than dropping goodies from your diet for a few weeks! Nothing wrong with dropping the goodies for a while! In the past I have fasted from my favorite things! I have fasted from coffee – and got terminally crabby for a week! I have fasted from meat – and dreamed of big juicy T-bone steaks I don't even normally eat! I tried fasting once from ice cream and then broke my fast at the end with not one but two big, delicious, sweet blackberry ice cream cones on a hot summer day! Oh, oh, oh.....mmmmm. What can I say? Then once I got really creative with a non-food habit and decided to fast from driving over the speed limit for a week! Wow, did that teach me something about myself and my habits. *School zones – do you know how s-l-o-w 20 miles an hour really is?*

I'm not a great candidate for just saying NO. At least, I'm not much good at saying No unless I can see the YES beyond the No. And that is what I mean by the question, *what is helpful*. I learned that if I took my coffee money and sent it to a Fair Trade non-profit coffee organization, my crabbiness had a purpose. I learned to appreciate that driving the speed limit often gave me those few minutes quietly to myself that I often complain I never have.

Suppose, though, that we were to take *fasting* to a whole new level. Suppose we were to really do what Jesus did – and *fast from fear*? Isn't it fear, after all, that drives so much of our days? So much of our rushing, our consuming, our crabbiness, is just fear in action! *What if I don't get there? What if I don't get that? What if I'm wrong? What will people think? What if I don't have time?* It's all fear!

What if we were to practice fasting from fear? Look at us this morning, for example, here in South Church. We are less than a hundred people in a cavernous building that holds near a thousand. I sometimes hear people expressing their fear about our numbers, as though who we are and what we are doing here is not enough. That's fear speaking. Tell me, how attractive is fear? Who would want to join a community of fear? Suppose we were to fast from fear about our numbers for a time, and simply notice when we speak of ourselves with fear, and say no, we will not speak out of fear. Suppose instead we were to speak of ourselves as a small Christian community with a huge heart? How attractive is that? Who might want to join a church that is excited to share its heart?

I have a good friend who struggles with depression. He has a good job and for a long time he was able to keep his depression a secret. But not very long ago things began to fall apart. He couldn't seem to keep his inner life and his outer life together. At last he began to seek help and slowly but surely his depression started to lose control over his life. But now he realizes that part of his healing is to rebalance his life between his job and the rest of him. And he is afraid to claim his healing and lose his job. I understand the fear, but the fear puts the depression back in control. Suppose he were to fast from fear for a time? Suppose he were to begin to believe that fasting from fear could be good for his job? Where might that lead him?

I am aware that *fasting from fear* sounds good but isn't easy. By its very nature *fear* feels huge and we feel small. But isn't that why we are here this morning worshiping in a tradition that has given Christians ways to handle fear for two thousand years? Listen up – please! Do we not believe in a God who is more powerful than our fear? Do we not affirm that Jesus came to show us how to

overcome our fear? Does our baptism not mean that we belong to a community of other believers who will not leave us alone in our fear?

What holds us back from claiming what we believe?

I know about fear just as you do. This coming week I will be moving into the final stages of my divorce. As long a process as this divorce has been and as much relief as I feel at finally reaching the end of legal wrangling, still there is fear. I am afraid about money. I am afraid about relationships with my three daughters. I do not know what the future holds. So I am asking God this week to help me fast from my fear. I am asking God to be God for me this week, to be more powerful than my fear. I am asking Jesus to help me notice where I am afraid and how to step aside from acting out of my fear. And as a member of this community, I ask for your prayers because I believe I am not alone in knowing what fear is and I am not alone in believing that fear does not have to be in control.

I am claiming what I believe! And so can you!

Let me add to my invitation. Once we get started on fasting from fear, a whole new realm of strength and possibility opens up. We begin to realize that the personal and public are one. Our personal lives are deeply connected to the life of our world around us. I am afraid for our nation at this time in our history. Are you? I am afraid of what it means that we cannot come to terms with the health care crisis and our failure to extend health care to tens of millions of Americans. I am afraid that our massive response to our fear of terrorism erodes the shape and size of our civil liberties. I am afraid that we are stuck in war, stuck in debt, stuck in dependency on other nations for our productivity, stuck in anger, blame

and political grandstanding. What sort of world are we leaving our children and grandchildren? Do you share my fear?

But we believe we have a God more powerful than fear! We believe Jesus can show us the way to live with courage and generosity and wisdom! We believe we are not alone! In our public heart, then, let us pray and fast from fear and act like we *believe* what we believe! Let us ask God to help us fast from our fear and show us how heal the heart of a nation!

Each week in this Lenten season as I preach on several of the ancient Christian practices, we will follow up with a Wednesday Rejoice Night service focused on the practice of that week. This week, this Wednesday night, we will focus on *fasting from fear*. You are invited. Please sign up in the Parish Hall. We will “practice our practice,” and the following week we will take a look at how our practice shifts our hearts and our lives.

Let us fast then! An hour at a time, a day at a time, a week at a time, a lifetime! Fear is *not* our destiny! In the words of an old spiritual – *God would not’a brought us so far just to leave us now!*

Amen