

JUST LENT: Go Fast!

Isaiah 58:1-9a and Matthew 6:16-18
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday in Lent, March 12, 2017
Rev. Charlie Berthoud

⁶Is 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?

⁷Is 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?

You just heard a powerful reading from the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah reminds us the true religious devotion (such as prayer and fasting) must be accompanied by faithful action in daily living, with particular concern for the poor, the hungry, and those who are usually forgotten.

In this season of Lent, our focus is fast-pray-act, and we have a devotional available. The ushers are coming forward now to hand them out to anyone who needs one. If you already have one and want another to share with a friend, please take one.

Lent is traditionally a time for intensified religious devotion, such as prayer and fasting), as we pray the prayer of Psalm 51: Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. In Lent we are called to reflect on and turn away from our sin with renewed intensity.

What we also must do, and which the church sometimes forgets, is turn to neighbors in need and act for justice in the world. So we have made various invitations to you to find concrete, tangible ways to love your neighbor and to act for justice.

You see info about those opportunities on our devotional and in the bulletin.

Habitat, engaging with race relations, writing letters to Congress, doing a police ride-along, etc

Fasting and acting for justice reflect a Christian faith of integrity.

Our gospel reading today comes from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is teaching his disciples about avoiding hypocrisy and living with integrity.

Listen for God's word.

¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ 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.

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“Whenever you fast...” Jesus said. There is an assumption in his words, that the disciples were routinely fasting. He didn’t say “You should fast.” He said “When you fast...” And he called them to do their religious deeds with integrity: “When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites.....”

For centuries, fasting has been part of our religious tradition along with other religious traditions. Just about every major religious tradition encourages fasting from food for the sake of humility and renewal.

In the Christian Bible, fasting happens at time of fear and uncertainty, as a way of humbly coming before God, and at key moments of transition—like the beginning of Jesus’ ministry that we heard about last week. There is a sense that fasting will both prepare people for the challenges of what lies ahead and more fully open people to receiving God’s power and love.

But fasting has fallen out of favor in today’s world. The idea of intentionally denying oneself of food or anything seems absurd in our consumer culture.

The only time most of us fast is when the doctor tells us to do so before a blood test or a procedure. And then we do so, because we recognize the benefits to our physical health.

But what if fasting for spiritual reasons brought benefits to our spiritual health?

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The first time I fasted was in college, on the Thursday before Thanksgiving. One week prior to a day when we typically overindulge in turkey and stuffing and pie, we were invited to skip a meal or two or three and donate the proceeds from that meal to Oxfam, a group working around the world against hunger and poverty.

So if you signed up to skip a meal, the campus food service would share the cost of that meal with Oxfam. Some people forgot and tried to enter the cafeteria, but they were denied.

This wasn't a specifically Christian invitation, but many of us in the campus Christian fellowship group participated and found it a nourishing experience, an opportunity for spiritual growth. And even though some of us were worried about getting really hungry and struggling, it wasn't that big a deal.

The greatest benefit of the fast was that it helped us understand the plight of those who don't get three meals a day, in a very tangible way. Sure we got a little grumble in our stomach here and there, but then we tried to remember how many millions of people around the world had to go to work and school that day without much food.

When I was in Nicaragua in the 1980s in a time of warfare, a leading Catholic priest fasted for 30 days for peace, and he invited people to join him. So I did, just for one day, which I spent at a park, writing in my journal, chatting with people, reading, praying, and drinking water.

And in another church I served as the Associate Pastor doing lots of youth ministry, we did a 30 Hour Famine through World Vision—not eating and raising money to fight hunger and poverty. I wrote about this in our weekly CONNECTIONS email. (If you don't get CONNECTIONS and want to, contact the church office.)

Every time I've fasted from food, I've done it with initial fear, as I worried about being unable to function. But in the end, I've found it to be a renewing and refreshing experience, giving me new perspective on hunger and my calling as a Christian.

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If you haven't already given it a try in this Lenten season, I encourage you to try fasting, maybe from food, maybe something else.

Fast for a meal or two

Fast from TV or social media for a couple of days

Fast from buying anything or looking at any ads for a few days

Fast from coffee, or chocolate, or alcohol—for however long you can.

St. Augustine famously said,

“God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.”

Fasting is a way of emptying our hands, our stomachs, and our lives just a little bit, so we can more easily receive what God has to offer.

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As for me, this season of Lent, I am fasting from alcohol. After a long day, I sometimes enjoy a beer or a glass of wine, but I decided to fast this season. I’m aware of alcohol’s destructive power and I don’t want to become too dependent on anything. I know of too many families where alcohol is a problem. And it’s quite frankly disturbing to see the billions and billions of dollars that we spend on alcohol as a society, while people are dying from hunger and not having clean water.

So along with my fast I’m keeping track of my approximate spending on alcohol, and I’ll be donating that amount to our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering on Palm Sunday. OGHS supports the Presbyterian Hunger Program and more.

Wouldn’t it be cool if all the Presbyterians in this country stopped drinking alcohol for a week and gave the proceeds to One Great Hour of Sharing, to help feed hungry people around the world?

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Another invitation this season of Lent is to read *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, by Jim Wallis. We have about 6 of our 20 copies left as of this morning. We could order more if necessary.

I’m about 50 pages into this challenging book, in which author Jim Wallis challenges white America to become aware of white privilege and to think about the sin of racism. He invites us to repent, noting that repentance is not simply being sorry, but “turning in a new and better direction.” (p. xxviii).

He encourages people of faith to actively engage with people across lines of race, class, and religion, noting from his own life story: “I have always learned the most

about the world by going to places I was never supposed to be and being with people I was never supposed to meet.” (p.4)

He writes: “Loving our neighbors means identifying with their suffering, meeting them in it, and working together to change it.” (p. 8)

So in this season of Lent, I’ve been prayerful thinking about race relations, and I’m wondering how to act. Maybe fasting will help me figure it out.

To help me figure out fasting, I’ve gone back to this delightful book called *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, which has a chapter on fasting. Author Marjorie Thompson encourages Christians to fast, to experience a little bit of hunger (for food, or chocolate, or TV, computers, or whatever), arguing that we in middle class America may not be hungry enough for the things that really matter.

And she says that fasting makes space in our lives so that “the Spirit can creatively use our talents and energies in the service of the Kingdom. (p. 80)

So when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites..... and pray that God would help you to hunger for the things that really matter, and that you can find new ways to serve God’s Kingdom.

Let us pray....