

Ash Wednesday C
Peace, Seattle
March 6, 2019
Isaiah 58:1-12

ON FASTING

We ate five times a day, on average, in the home I grew up in. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, plus an after school snack—most often home-made—and often a late evening snack before bedtime. And that was just fine with me.

I was 19 years old before I purposely missed a meal. Of course, when I was in bed with the flu I missed a few meals. But the first time I intentionally fasted was during my freshman year at PLU.

The campus ministry was sponsoring a World Hunger awareness and fundraising event. All you had to do was sign up, and agree to forego your lunch on the appointed day, and the cost of that meal was given as a donation to the World Vision hunger organization.

It seemed like a good idea to me, and it wouldn't cost me anything out of pocket. So I signed up... And then promptly forgot about it.

When the appointed day arrived, I joined the stream of students heading across campus toward the cafeteria after morning classes. It wasn't until I was about to go through the turnstile that I saw the sign that reminded me—today was the day I had signed up to fast.

SHOOT! I thought to myself, I'M HUNGRY! IF I HAD REMEMBERED I WAS GOING TO FAST I WOULD HAVE EATEN A BETTER BREAKFAST!

I was embarrassed by my own thoughts.

As I stepped out of line and walked away, I became very aware of my growling stomach, and of the plentiful buffet that was spread out just on the other side of that cafeteria door. Funny how aware you become of something when we can't have it!

Then the thought hit me: YOU'RE MISSING ONE MEAL AND YOU'RE DOING IT BY CHOICE. THINK OF ALL THE PEOPLE WHO COUNT THEMSELVES FORTUNATE TO EVEN HAVE ONE MEAL A DAY.

That simple exercise opened up a new world of thinking for me.

Some years later, I learned more about fasting. This time from my daughter, Megan, age 7 at the time, who was required to fast before her medical procedures. No food, no water, for 24 hours or more.

That's a long time for a little girl. I didn't know what else to do, so I said, I'LL FAST WITH YOU. Somehow it spread out the load. At least it made me feel like I was doing something in the face of a diagnosis neither she nor I had control over.

I also learned about fasting from the Karuk, Yurok, and Hupa people I served alongside in Indian ministry. Fasting for 10 days prior to beginning the great Spiritual Dance Cycles was common. This kind of fasting didn't involve complete abstinence from food, but rather a purposeful practice of eating only certain traditional foods as a way of preparing spiritually and physically for the Dances.

Nowadays, eco-focused fasting is gaining steam.

Last year we promoted a CARBON FAST during Lent. This year we're being encouraged to add leaves of commitment to the bare tree out in the narthex. More and more churches are encouraging fasting from the use of PLASTIC, which is a lot more difficult than you think, given our culture's addiction to packaging.

Poised here on the edge of the Salish Sea, we've seen the impact plastic garbage has on the animals life of Puget Sound. And we've heard and read about the great floating garbage patch the size of Texas that wreaks havoc on sea life in the central Pacific.

In Isaiah chapter 58, the Lord has a lot to say about fasting. Most of it is critical. God comes down hard on his people. What was their problem?

It seems that they had no problem going without food. In fact, they were pretty good at it. They would put on sackcloth and bow their heads and make a grand show of it all. But they failed to connect this ritual of fasting with God's cry for justice and care for the hungry and homeless.

LOOK, the Lord chides them, YOU FAST, THINKING YOU CAN GET MY ATTENTION, BUT IN YOUR HEARTS I SEE YOUR REAL AGENDA. AT THE SAME TIME YOU'RE SEEKING MY ATTENTION, YOU'RE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF YOUR WORKERS! FASTING LIKE THAT ISN'T GOING TO MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD!

If fasting—in whatever form—is just going through the motions, then it's not worth much. If fasting is disconnected from the way we treat our fellow human beings or the other-than-human world; if it is not informed by the spiritual disciplines of prayer and acts of charity; if it doesn't help transform your community life, then runs the risk of being an empty gesture.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus picks up a related theme. FASTING ISN'T ABOUT A PUBLIC DISPLAY, IT'S ABOUT DEEPENING OUR KNOWLEDGE OF OUR DEPENDENCE OF GOD.

This year during Lent we'll be remembering individuals in the body of Christ who demonstrated uncommon courage through acts of love and discipleship in the face of fear and institutional injustice.

Harriet Tubman; Sojourner Truth; St. Patrick; Oscar Romero; John Donne, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—each of them in their own way learned to heed what the LORD was saying through the prophet, and each lived—and in some cases died—with the consequences of their actions.

As Bonhoeffer made clear, fasting of this sort is not an attempt to be seen as “holier than thou.” On the contrary.

“Judging others makes us blind,” he writes, “but love gives us sight. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.”

As we mark the beginning of Lent tonight, of our 40 day sojourn with Christ and one another, we can make choices about our habits, about our conduct, about how we will give ourselves to the process of spiritual growth during the coming weeks.

And as we receive the mark of the ashes and the bread of life, we are reminded where we come from, whose we are and the common destiny which awaits us all. It's a matter of death and life. Amen.