



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for February 14
“Old Habits/New Habits: Fasting”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18

Challenged and Inspired

This morning we close out our present sermon entitled, *Old Habits/New Habits*. All through I have been both challenged and inspired. I hope you have been as well.

To be honest with you, the *holy habits* we have been talking about have gained quite a bit of traction in my life since the first of the year. Again, I hope that has been the case for you.

This morning we consider the *holy habit* of fasting, which very well may be the toughest of the habits we’ve talked about. If we’re not inspired this morning, then maybe we will at least be challenged.

Today we read from Matthew 6:16-18 where Jesus talks about fasting, and doing so with the right spirit. Let’s hear then Matthew 6:16-18.

Matthew 6:16-18

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Presently, Marti Gras celebrations are being held all around the world, albeit a bit differently because of the pandemic. There won’t be any parades.

Believe it or not, Marti Gras is a Christian festival that dates back centuries. That’s hard to believe given all the debauchery and excess that goes on during Marti Gras.

Marti Gras culminates with Fat Tuesday. Over the centuries on Fat Tuesday people consumed all the rich foods they had stored up. They did so in preparation for the season of Lent which was, and is to this day, a season of fasting and penance. We’ll have to admit that Fat Tuesday is a bit over the top these days and are left to wonder if those who party so hard on Fat Tuesday are just as serious when it comes to Ash Wednesday.

The Holy Habit of Fasting

It is interesting that the last sermon in this series puts us right at the doorstep of Lent. I can’t believe it, but Lent is upon us.

During Lent, you and I, among other things, will put our focus on those things we need to give up, so we might be able to take on those things we need to take up.

A consideration of where we are and where we need to be is very much a part of the Lenten journey. Penance and sacrifice are also a part. The two help us experience Christ more deeply. With that in mind, we shouldn't be surprised that the last "holy habit" we talk about in this series is fasting.

Fasting is essentially doing without, so our focus might be on more important things, namely the very power and presence of God in our lives. Fasting has a way of invigorating our spiritual lives and bringing glory to God.

John Wesley once wrote, *"First, let fasting be done unto the Lord with our eyes singly fixed on him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven."*

Most of us don't make a regular practice of fasting. I'll be the first to admit that fasting is one of the tougher spiritual disciplines for me. I have fasted plenty of times, but it's not been very easy. I'll be aware of that as I try and fast this Lent.

Let's face it, it's tough giving up what you have come to value and, for me, food is one of those things. Preachers are afforded so few vices, and food is one of them.

Misdirected Motivation

As we read just a few minutes ago from scripture Christ was not at all silent about fasting. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers a word about fasting and, more importantly, a word on how to go about it in the right spirit. He, essentially, says the same thing when it comes to praying and giving to the poor. A "right spirit" is critical.

Jesus doesn't command us to fast. He just assumes we will. He begins his thoughts on the subject with the words, *"When you fast."* The words *"if you fast"* and *"you should fast"* are not mentioned.

As with all things spiritual, motivation is the key. We need to be asking ourselves all the time, *"Why we do what we do?"* Particularly, when it comes to our spiritual lives.

During Christ's day, people fasted essentially to be noticed. When people fasted, they threw ashes over your heads and let them drift down on their faces. Their intent was to call attention to themselves. They wanted to be recognized for their piety. Theirs was a misguided motivation. *"Hey, look at me. See what I'm doing. I'm fasting. I am so religious."*

Jesus begged to differ. Hear, again what he had to say about such things.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. They have received their reward.

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting.

Fast only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Matthew 6:16-18

Practicing piety to be noticed by anyone other than God defeats the purpose. What we do needs to be to an audience of one. When it comes to fasting, we do what we do to draw ourselves closer to God, not to gain the attention of others.

A Grand Opportunity to Get Out of the Way

You and I would do well to see fasting as a grand opportunity. Fasting offers us the opportunity to get out of the way and let God do his thing. When coupled with prayer it offers the divine opportunity for real breakthrough.

When we fast, we say “no” to ourselves and what we want, while saying “yes” to God and what he wants.

Mark Batterson writes in his book, *The Circle Maker*, “When you fast and pray in tandem it’s almost like a moving sidewalk to your desired destination. You get there in half the time.”

When we fast our minds are cleared, our hearts are purified, and our focus is riveted on God. All other motivations are put aside for the sake of seeking God’s will for a particular issue.

Richard Foster in his book, *The Celebration of Discipline* has a wonderful chapter on fasting. He is so serious about God’s leadership when we fast that he asserts that all fasting should be “*God-initiated*” and “*God-ordained*.”

That way we find ourselves depending on him. Instead of our energies figuring into the equation, we trust more so in the power of God. As it is with so many of the “*holy habits*,” if left to ourselves we’ll be apt to fail. Trusting in God and his power will see us through every time. The key is getting out of the way so God can do his thing.

Our True Sustenance

Fasting doesn’t exclusively have to do with food. There are many things we need to pull away from, things that get in between ourselves and God all the time. What are some of those things for you?

For me, I would do well to watch a lot less TV. A fast from the flat screen would do me well. The same could be said for all the time I spend in front of the computer.

Food though is often what people think of when they think of fasting. That was certainly what Jesus had in mind when we read Matthew 6:16-18.

I have to tell you I am fixated on food. A Grieb is always looking for his next meal. With my family, we can sit around the table finishing one meal and begin a discussion about the next. There are many reasons why I run, but one of them is that it gives me the luxury of pretty much being able to eat what I want.

To miss a meal is a big deal for me. To miss a few meals, even for spiritual reasons, is a really big deal. For one who tends to eat his problems, fasting is that much tougher. I only bring that up because I figure I am not alone. I get home at night, and as Cheryl puts it, I tend to graze. There is a lot of nervous eating going on. I’d do well to pull away, and I am not talking about dieting. I am talking about getting food out of the way so I might see God more clearly.

Saying “no,” as a spiritual exercise, is a good thing. It allows us to see who our true sustenance really is.

The Means of Grace

All the things we have talked about over the past few weeks—prayer, Bible study, worship, service, the Sacraments, and today, fasting—are all means of grace.

They are highways, of sorts, that lead us to the very throne of God. Fasting included. The means of grace awaken us to God's love. They make us aware of his every desire to provide for our lives.

God is able to provide infinitely more than any *"all you can eat"* buffet. And fasting might be the very thing to awaken us to that.

The Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 6:12 writes, *"I will not be enslaved by anything."* I Corinthians 6:12

A conscious, disciplined, Spirit-led choice to fast from whatever it is that has a hold on you may be the very thing to *free* you to follow God like you never have before. It may also be the very thing to clear your vision, so you are able to see where it is God wants you to go and what it is God wants you to do.

Praying and Fasting

Dolly Parton has been in the news lately with the re-make of 9-5 for a Super Bowl commercial. The re-make is titled, 5-9 and honors those who are busy with a side hustle. I have been impressed with Dolly for a long time. My grandkids in Nashville get a book a month from her foundation. Every kid in Tennessee gets one. That's a big deal. Way to go, Dolly!!

Quite a few years back *People* magazine interviewed Dolly. During that interview she surprised the interviewer with one of her responses.

"Where do you get such a strong character?" the interviewer asked. And with that, Dolly shared about her family and Christian faith.

"What about psychiatry?" asked the interviewer. *"So many people find the need to get counseling, especially in the stresses of show business."*

"I don't see a psychiatrist. I fast instead."

"You what?" said the interviewer.

"I fast! I do it to get in touch with God. Sometimes I'll fast 7, 14, even 21 days. I don't drink nothing but water and I don't ever say when I'm on a fast. Scripture says you're not supposed to. I have never made a major decision without fasting and prayer."

Way to go, Dolly!!

Jesus assumes we are going to fast. He knows full well that doing so will connect us with God in profound and powerful ways.

Give it a try. What'd you say? I know I'm going to, and, hopefully, you won't know when I am doing it.