

March 16, 2023

WHEN LESS IS TRULY MORE

Each time I post one of these messages, I thank God for calling me to do this work, for equipping me to do it, and for access to the distribution platform. Today, I send my heartfelt thanks to you as well, for your readership. Although we may not have met in person, I know for a fact that you are God's beloved (John 3:16), so bearing you in mind motivates me as I write. In spite of my training and years of experience, is still very hard work.

Facing the empty page/screen is invariably the first difficulty. After perusing my ever-growing topic file, sensing a divine draw to a particular topic, and completing some preliminary research, it is time to start a draft. But then again, maybe I will have a cup of coffee or a snack first. But this time, I catch myself in the dodge, because the topic today is fasting.

How ironic it is that, rather than being content to sit and listen for the message about fasting that God will help me craft, I feel a competing urge to consume something instead. It is not because I am actually hungry; rather, it seems that food will somehow buffer the anxiety of a holy encounter and postpone the labor of birthing a truthful, coherent column. So, my body tries to preempt my soul; and that is precisely the tendency which fasting meets head-on.

Fasting is an ancient method of subjugating the physical appetite to stoke the spiritual one. Intentionally refraining from food while in need of wisdom, clarity, or spiritual fortification, or for a given period of time (such as the 40 days of Lent), reveals our deep attachment to physical comfort. A growling stomach triggers the question, "What am I truly hungry for?"

When fasting is practiced with spiritual intention, instead of a weight loss motive, it wrests our attention from our bodies to our souls, and redirects us to the divine Source of real, eternal satisfaction instead of something fleeting.

For many people, myself included, fasting is a more difficult spiritual discipline than prayer or giving. Prayer costs time, and giving costs money, but fasting carries the more intimate price of self-denial and physical discomfort. Yet the spiritual outcome can be significant, as we see throughout the Bible.

For instance, when the idolatrous Israelites sought relief from subjection under the Philistines, they returned to the Lord and cried out to Him in repentance with **fasting** (1 Samuel 7:1 ff). When King David was desperate, bearing the reproach of his enemies and in the depths of despair, he **fasted** and called to God for answers and deliverance (Psalm 69:10).

When Daniel realized that the time prophesied for Israel's Babylonian captivity was ending, he "turned his face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with **fasting** and sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:1-3). When Ezra led the Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem without benefit of military escort, he called for **fasting** and prayer so that they might humble themselves before God and be granted safe passage, for God's glory (Ezra 8:21-23).

Jesus himself **fasted** and prayed for 40 days, alone in the wilderness, to prepare for his cross-bound public ministry (Matthew 4).

All of these fervent prayers were amplified by fasting, and all were answered in powerful ways. In this we see the great love behind Jesus' explicit expectation that his followers will fast. He said, "When you fast...", not "If you fast."

He instructed us to do so secretly, not to be seen by others but by God the Father alone, who "will reward you" (Matthew 6:16-18). Is it not worth fasting -- from food, tv, social media, or anything else -- to experience God's reward, of any kind?

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux