

FASTER

JANUARY 19, 2020 SERMON

Matthew 6:16-18 (NIV) “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.

When I was a kid, I did not like fast food.. In our town, there was a McDonald’s and a Hardees. I didn’t like either one. I remember when Chicken McNuggets came on the scene in 1983, and let me tell you, I wasn’t having any of that either. And then I tasted a McDonald’s Filet-O-Fish sandwich, and everything changed.

The Filet-O-Fish was created because of Christian spiritual practice. In stores that served predominantly Catholic neighborhoods, sales went down so dramatically during the Fridays of Lent, McDonalds had to come up with a meatless option.

You know what we almost got? A grilled slice of pineapple covered with pasteurized cheese on a cold bun called The Hula Burger.

That makes the Filet-O-Fish sound a little more normal as a food product. They had a contest on a Friday to see which product was more popular. Consequently, I can now get the Filet-O-Fish anytime I — well, we’ll come back to that later.

Let’s go from fast food to fasting, which is our spiritual practice to discuss today. Fasting is probably the least understood and practiced spiritual practice of Judaism that Christianity adopted. We have talked here before about what we fasted from for Lent. There’s this idea of a Lenten Fast. That’s even what we call what Roman Catholics do when they abstain from eating meat. But that’s not a fast. That’s abstaining from eating meat.

There are times when we might abstain from something, like eating meat or drinking alcohol or screen time — because depriving ourselves of those things seems to be a good choice. And when we do that, the abstention has its own reward. We might lose weight, reset our appetites, save money, get attention, whatever.

Fasting is a totally different thing. Fasting is getting empty. Usually it’s eating dinner one night

and then the next day eating dinner but nothing else. Some faith traditions have embraced this practice more than others. Our Muslim neighbors fast a full month of the year, at Ramadan. Russian Orthodox Christians have a lot of fast days throughout the year, although they sometimes do more selective fasts — no meat, maybe no oil too. Roman Catholics celebrate two true fasting days, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, which is only for people between the ages of 18 and 59, and it can now include two small meals during the day that don't add up to the size of a regular meal.

So while fasting was a thing in Jewish tradition and in early Christian tradition, Christian groups that do partake in the spiritual practice of fasting as a community have set looser guidelines on it. And as I prepared to preach about this idea of fasting, I realized there are good reasons why the strictures have loosened. To ask someone to fast, first they have to have enough to eat from day to day anyway. You don't ask hungry people to skip a meal for God. And then there are age and health issues. No modern pastor is going to responsibly advise their congregation to fast for 24 hours without advising them to talk to their doctor first. You get me?

But Jesus doesn't say, "If you decide to fast or are healthy enough to fast, then..." He says, "When you fast..." Fasting as spiritual practice is different from fasting for a colonoscopy. So what would the spiritual practice of fasting look like today — and what's the point?

First, let's cover the practical stuff. Here are the best practices I have found in my research on fasting, and if you're interested in fasting, you might want to write three things these down:

- 1) Fasting and prayer go together. Fasting is very uncomfortable. I've tried it several times. After lunch, it gets really hard to focus on anything else but your body's demands to put food in it. This is when you pray. You feel hunger, and you pray. There's not point in fasting without accompanying prayer.
- 2) Fasting and giving go together. **If** you can afford to fast, you can afford to give the money you'd use to feed yourself during those hours to

someone else who can't afford to eat (or fast). I have ideas about people who need food, so you can come talk to me about that if you feel a pull to fasting.

- 3) Fasting and going about your business go together. Jesus says the hypocrites go around looking miserable. You can imagine. "I'm fasting." He says when we fast, we should put oil on our heads and wash our faces. In the modern world, take a shower and comb your hair. Look like it's any other day. If we walk around telling people we're fasting, we kinda miss the point. And if we're fasting for any other reason that in response to God, we're going to get our own reward.

I struggle with fasting because I have very low blood sugar, so I start to see stars around 3 PM when I've fasted, but I also eat more than I need to, and I believe Jesus meant it when he said, "when you fast." I knew I had to make my own way, that anyone who tried this would have to make their own way. And I thought about those best practices — fasting and prayer, fasting and giving, fasting and going about my business.

On Fridays, I have been spending the morning in Ozark at the Assisted Living places. I usually have coffee for breakfast, and by the time I leave the place in Ozark, I am stomach-growling hungry. So I stop, about every other Friday, to buy a McDonald's Filet-O-Fish meal on my way home, and I inhale it. On the other weeks, I stop at St George's and buy an apple fritter because that's the only place to get a good apple fritter. Fight me. And neither of those things is essential to my survival. So for the last two weeks, quietly, I drove past both restaurants. I prayed on the way home. I made myself a quick lunch. I donated the money I would have spent on Friday lunches this month to a food charity, anonymously. And I went about my business, and am only telling you because, frankly, I needed an example.

And that is not gonna be a perfect fit for you because you probably eat breakfast but not Filet-O-Fish sandwiches. But if fasting appeals to you, I think you'll find that you'll see places in your life where a different food choice — either a skipped

meal or an abbreviated meal or a skipped meal out — might give you space. Because that's really the point of fasting.

The point of fasting is to empty yourself to make room for God. If we fast, we will feel empty, which will make us appreciate how often we are full. It will grow compassion in us for those who aren't usually full. If our body's reminders that we are empty prompt us to prayer and generosity, there's more space for God to work in our lives.

Sometimes the Old Testament and stories of Jesus talk about the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus turned over the moneychangers tables in the courtyard. But inside the Temple itself, do you know what was there? *Not much*. I've seen diagrams of it. There was the ark of the covenant for awhile, and not much else. It was basically empty. Because they expected God to fill it with God's presence. We hear people quote 1 Corinthians all the time by saying "my body is a temple," but the Temple was left purposely empty so God could take up space.

There are so many stories I could tell you about what has happened in my life when I left space for God to fill. We are so used to being full, and I don't just mean food. And I know that all of us aren't always full in our bellies, but some of us are full anytime we want to be. We're full in our bodies and we're full in our schedule and we're full of activities and responsibilities and in our entertainment, and there's so much muchness.

It's kinda like prayer. We spend our time talking to God. Do we leave space for God to talk back? Our lives are full. Do we leave space for God to fill and work and move in them?

As I worked with this scripture on fasting, I kept going back in my mind to this John passage, John 7:37-38: *On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."*

It's my favorite weird translation. The NIV does a decent job. Some translations say "out of believer's hearts will flow rivers of living water." But John actually says something in Greek like,

"Out of the body cavities of believers will flow rivers of living water." Out of empty spaces. That's where God takes up space in us. That's what living water flows from. Are we leaving space?

Because God will fill what space we will leave God. And God will flow out of that space.

Jesus says, "When you fast..." I'm not going to give you medical or dietary advice about how often you should intentionally skip meals. I'm merely saying the spiritual practice of fasting can empty us so God can fill us. The good news is, God will fill us if we make room for God. We all have different lives, spiritual and regular. We all have different places of fullness. We all have somewhere in our life that needs a little space, an emptying, a fast. And only we can figure that out for ourselves if we seek a closer relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus says, "When you fast." When we leave space for God. When we choose to go hungry. When we choose to sit down. When we choose to give God some empty time. When we leave space for God to speak. When we get empty, God will fill, and God will flow. Amen.