

Spiritual Practice III: Fasting

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Psalm 51:6-17; Luke 18: 18-23

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time



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This sermon is the last in a series of three about Spiritual Practice. The series has been fairly simple. The first time, we focussed on the need for spiritual practice. Last week was about prayer - probably the most important spiritual practice of all.

This week is about fasting.

After prayer, I believe that fasting is one of the most important spiritual practices we can embody in our lives. And not just traditional food fasts, because, of course, not all of us can physically fast from food. But there are other ways to enter into this discipline. As those with such an abundance, it is an especially necessary discipline. And as those with such an abundance, it is an especially difficult discipline. For me, there are several reasons for this that to do with the way we understand desire.

You might say, that our trouble with fasting started in the Garden of Eden. Our difficulty with denying ourselves, began when God said to Adam and Eve, "You see that fruit on that one tree? You may not have any of that."

And, of course, as with many fasts, we couldn't last.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition says it like this,

The world was given to [Adam and Eve] by God as "food" - as means of life... In food itself God ...was the principle of life. Thus, to eat, to be alive, to know God and be in communion with [God] were one in the same thing. Thetragedy of Adam [and Eve] was that [they] ate "apart" from God in order to be independent of [God]... because [they] believed that food had life in itself and that by partaking of that food, could be like God, i.e., have life in [themselves.] (Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood: NY, 1974, pp. 94-95.)

One of our leading Reformed writers on spirituality, Reverend Margaret Thompson says that when we humans could not limit our desires by one, single tree in the entire garden, we took the bait that the serpent offered - we chafed against the discipline and fell to the temptation to "see a single boundary as so restrictive that it negate[d] the good of all other freedoms." (*Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Westminster/John Knox, 1995, pp. 72-3.) The story of Adam and Eve teaches us that our acceptance of that single boundary to our freedom could have kept us in the knowledge that we are dependent upon God for life. But, it seems our desire for freedom was beyond limits. Our desires to be like God were stronger.

The thought might follow, therefore, that when we fast, we are in a sense returning to this kind of knowledge of God. The Jewish people learned this as they were kept hungry as they journeyed through the Sinai to the promised land. In Deuteronomy God says, "[I] humbled you by letting

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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you hunger, then by feeding you with manna.... in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by the very word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (8:3) So - in being humbled, it seems as if there is an act of repentance that goes hand in hand with fasting.

And indeed, the Jewish people fasted for this reason. Often fasts were preemptive. If things looked bad, the nation or community or the person would fast to appease the wrath or the indifference of God. The fast indicated that there was a deep commitment to turn back from our disobedience and return to God, repentant and humbled.

The other reason for fasting was as a way of cleansing to prepare oneself to do the work of God. Moses, Elijah and Jesus all fasted for 40 days before their works of leadership and prophecy. In a way, these preparatory fasts made them stronger - more open to God’s leading and

more resistant to the desires for power and influence that would go hand in hand with their calling.

Fast food nation that we are, it’s no wonder that fasting rarely makes it into the pulpit let alone into our everyday lives.

I’ve certainly had my fair share of trouble with this kind of denial. For years it’s been difficult for me to control my eating, for various reasons.

I did go on a fast one time, when I was in my mid 20s. One of my friends had an older brother who got into the cleansing fast trend that was popular at the time. So she and I loaded up juices and the supplements and fasted - and I went for 17 days without eating. I lost a little weight - I didn’t have so much to lose back then. But the thing I appreciated the most was that it was amazingly freeing. The desire for food faded away.

When I didn’t think about what was next on the menu, I thought of other things in the same way. In a sort of strange way, it helped me look at some other excesses in my life that had nothing to do with food. Not much changed, outwardly, but I was starting to think about new ways to live. And, you know how some people can tell you the story of the best meal they ever ate? I think the Food Network even has a show about that now. Well, I can’t tell you the best meal I ever had, but I can tell you exactly what I had when I broke my fast. It was a big tomato, right off the vine, no salt, no nothing. I just ate it like an apple and it’s by far the best tomato I’ve ever had. Now, I don’t recommend this particular kind of food fast - I think they’re fairly unhealthy for our bodies. But I do think we need to reclaim the fast as a part of lives as Christians. In fact, I think that is quite necessary that we claim the fast as a part of the Christian life. I think fasting, in all its forms, not just limiting our food, is the one act of mercy that our life together depends upon.

Miriam’s poem, “The Quality of Mercy,” which is printed on the front of the bulletin, describes so clearly what we are up against. For indeed, we know that it is true - there is a weight of sorrow on the world as heavy as a brickyard or prison gate. We feel the tiredness of mercy, who can only lay out what there is to go around until we all stop throwing our weight around onto our brothers and sisters.

I hope we can agree that we are like the rich young ruler - and Adam and Eve - separated from a life in Christ by the vastness of our Garden. If we are like the rich young ruler - we must remember that Jesus told him that it would take a miracle - a camel through the eye of a needle - to make it possible for him to give what he had to the poor. The theologian Dan Migliore says in

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his book, *A Moral Creed for All Christians*, that the story of rich young ruler makes very clear that the burden of ending all this poverty and its accompanying miseries falls on us, the economically secure. And this is done by learning how to fast - learning how to share in ways that sustain us all.

So, let us struggle with the struggle.

Why do we struggle? What is the miracle that can help us? And why does fasting make a difference?

Let's start with desire. The first line of Psalm 51 that you all read so wonderfully and antiphonally this morning speaks about what God desires for us, "truth, in the inward being." This truth, though it may be difficult as our prayer of confession conveyed, (Psalm 51:1-5) looks beautiful - it is clean, whiter than snow, filled with joy and gladness - "create in us clean hearts, O God... a new and right spirit."

When I think of this kind of truth, the image of Ron's sculpture that is paired with Miriam's poem about mercy, comes to mind. She is beautiful and white as snow. Her face is turned upward with a sense of serenity and wisdom. And over her heart is an opening into her being - this marvelous, clean transparency. An open, ungrasping hand emerges from this transparent heart - offering and embodying the truth of the matter - that this desire of God's for the truth in us, is the desire that we need be concerned with.

For our human desires - each and every one - come with a caveat that may not be overcome. Ironically, tragically, mercilessly, it is the goal of all human desire to end itself. This is because each and every time we succeed in acquiring what we desire, then that object is no longer desirable. (James P. Carse, *The Silence of God*, Harper: San Francisco, 1985, p. 44.) The satisfaction of desire becomes dissatisfying.

The first part of Miriam's poem called, "Human," says it like this,

Something moves
alert under this sky
earmarked for survival.
It talks and walks,
remembers—
making its way across the planet,
taking ownership.
It eats and sleeps,
desires.
There is not enough
to fill it
or calm it.

Once we acquire something we desire, the cycle begins.

For an example, let's go back to the idea of money, which we looked at a bit last week.

We all desire money. And we need money within the system that we have all agreed to work and live within. But it is not actually the money we desire. If that were true, we would just keep it all, right? Once we get the money, we immediately move to use the money - get rid of it - so to

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speaking - by using it to get the things we need to live - home, food, education, child care, clothing and so on.

Of course, many of us accumulate things. And then we have to decide what it is we want to do with the extra stuff. And as we divest ourselves of this extra stuff, we look around for what else might accomplish what we really had in mind, which this old stuff doesn't fulfill any more.

Say we have a cell phone. But then we hear about, or see our friend's phone which does far more than place and receive telephone calls. It gets

e-mail - from as many accounts as you want. It has applications that can replace your GPS, portable DVD player, music player and so you go for it - donating your old phone to a nonprofit. Then you hear about another device that you can connect to your phone and word process - replacing your computer with a much smaller more portable device. Ah, just what marvelous, pleasurable things might that new object provide. Well, so far, I can only imagine - because - so far - I've gotten an iPhone, but have resisted the desire I have for an iPad.

So, the desires just build and build and build upon one another. Sure, we are played like a fiddle by the finely tuned symphony of the marketing machine. Good advertising plays on our very human nature so we will constantly replace things without destroying our sense of desire. For we humans are smart when it comes to marketing. We don't market the actual objects - we market the desire that the objects make possible, right? The best marketing teaches us about desires we never knew we had. Marketing doesn't fulfill desires, it excites desires. Stop and think about it.

But desire is nothing that is forced upon us. Desire always comes from within. It begins with an inner focus on what we lack and then turns its eye on what is required to make up that lack. So instead of having a transparent heart of mercy, with the open, offering and ungrasping hand that God desires for us, we have an empty space inside where our hearts are, with an open, empty hand longing to be filled by stuff that might finally satisfy our desires.

The other thing we can do with our extra stuff, is actually create a desire in others for what we have. It is how we build a business, build an organization, build a nation. This can be very productive if it is transparent. But we all know that it is difficult to be this generous. And it is difficult to live within the desires that arise when wealth and power accumulate as a result of our creativity. Also, it's easy to begin to want what belongs to others. Sometimes this desire is created as a strategy for disposing of our extra stuff. We make sure there is only a limited amount of it. It is easy to exploit others for our own gain - think of the pornography industry or human trafficking or enslaved or oppressed labor forces.

I think Jesus knew this about the rich young ruler. The young man said that he kept the commandments - all of them. But it wasn't true. He couldn't open his hand and let all of it go. He couldn't see how many commandments he may have broken on the way to acquiring what he had. He did not have what God desires for us - a desire for truth in our inward being.

You know, our human desire has even affected some of the ways we think about God. We create metaphors for God such as, God is a home for the wanderer. Our hearts are said to be restless unless they rest in God. We say God is a source of eternal and inexhaustible delight - the most desirable person of all. With these ideas about desiring God we can seem to be saying that life will always disappoint, but God never will disappoint us.

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But doesn't this view of things carry its own caveat, its own despair? For we have been given this life by God. If we say life will always disappoint, then we are saying that God has disappointed us already. We are then living out the same cycle with God that we live out with those things we desire. This can leave us open to the desire that Adam and Eve represented to us in the garden - the desire to make God over in the image that leaves us all the room we need to be like God. And these results can be devastating.

In her book, *The Wordy Shipmates*, Sarah Vowell, who has Native American ancestors, writes about a time in the early history of our country when this distortion of desire showed itself with no mercy.

She writes about the war between the early Puritan settlers and the Native Americans - the Pequot War of 1637.

On January 19, 1637, the Puritan churches in New England were ordered to a general fast. The Puritans fasted in the same way that ancient Israel fasted - to repent and try and show God that they were deserving of God's grace and mercy. Fasts were held for everything from drought to theological disputes. According to the journals of the day, the fast on January 19th was for a number of things - troubles with the home church in England, the bishops being popish, plague, famines and sword threatening them, dissensions among the churches and, finally, dangers from the Indians. (Roland Marchand, "The Antinomian Controversy," <http://marchland.ucdavis.edu/lessons/antinomian.html>)

There are those, including Sarah Vowell, who think that they were fasting, as well, to prepare themselves to do God's work. And she may be right based on some of the declarations made by the clergy after the Pequot War.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time explaining the complicated alliances that were formed among the European settlers and the tribes. But suffice it to say, there were the Dutch and their Indian allies - mostly the Pequots - and the English and their Indian allies - mostly the Naragansett. Other various and sometimes nefarious characters on both sides played different parts. But at the very center of it all was the extremely lucrative and booming fur trade. After many years of building trading posts that would block trade, shifting alliances, double crosses and betrayals and small, but deadly skirmishes and ambushes - there was a last straw. The Pequots kidnapped two young English girls. They were rescued and then the English and their Indian allies pressed on.

The Pequot village, which was near Mystic, CT, was surrounded by a palisade of logs. The English and their Indian allies surrounded the place and fired a volley of guns against the bows and arrows. Gaining access to the settlement, "with our swords in one hand and our carbines or muskets in the left," they fought hand to hand. Realizing the valor of their opponents, the English decided to burn the village. So they lit up the little bark houses and shut the Indians inside. One Englishman wrote, those who tried to escape were "entertained" with the point of a sword. About 6 or 700 men, women and children died.

One of the commanders, John Underhill said of the Pequot, "they deserved mercy for their valor." Another, Captain John Mason praised God, "for burning them up in the fire of their wrath, dunging the ground with their flesh. It is the Lord's doings, and it is marvelous in our eyes." (Sarah Vowell, *The Wordy Shipmates*, Riverhead Books: New York, 2008, pp. 191-4)

Governor Rev. John Winthrop wrote about the Pequot families as if they were burnt offerings. He recorded that they were a "sweet sacrifice to God." Reverend Roger Williams suggested that,

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as a humanitarian gesture, many of the remaining should be sold, at a profit. 30 warriors were drowned. And some women and children were distributed to the victors as servants. And 1400 persons were sold as slaves to the West Indies. They were taken there on the first American made slave ship. And when I read this, I couldn't believe it. But it's true. The ship's name was Desire. (Austin Meredith, "The Reverend Roger Williams," pp. 16 - 18, www.kouroo.info/kouroo/thumbnails/W/ReverendRogerWilliams.pdf)

Most historians point to this war or massacre as the moment when the Indians began to understand just who they were up against. This was the battle that convinced them that the Europeans were no one to trust and no one to associate with in any transparent and meaningful way. One writer of the time notes that the Indians declared, "It is evil, it is evil, because it is too furious and slays too many men." (Vowell, p. 195.) An historian notes that this war marks the spot when Americans ignored the fact that this was about the money - the fur trade - and the power. He writes, "For most nations, wars are about power and self-interest, but for Americans...they have always been about righteousness. Americans look at war as an epic struggle between good and evil." (Meredith, p. 18)

To mark the success of their fast in January, the Puritans declared a day of thanksgiving October 30, 1637. And that, my friends, is one of the major sources of our current Thanksgiving day holiday. And it is also the beginning of the end of the First Americans - the Native Americans. Most of us don't know many of the details of this genocide. But we know it happened. And if we allow the truth to enter our inward beings we must admit, that we are indeed like Miriam's poem describes: making its way across the planet, taking ownership.

It eats and sleeps, desires. There is not enough. There is not enough.....

We can be like Ron's sculpture that goes with this poem. It is a human torso, cut away in front. The rib cage curves inwardly open in front of us around a rugged and heavy spine. And it is filled on the inside with human heads, tiny faces, sculpted from the clay and affixed in crowded rows into the curve of the chest cavity. The faces are silent, expressionless, perhaps mute in their judgment. They remind me of the Pequot people trapped inside their village, the ribs of the palisades keeping them inside.

To me this sculpture represents the cost that can be counted - the sacrifice, perhaps - in actual human lives, when we need to fill the constantly empty space inside with our human desires that need to be satisfied. Miriam's poem goes on to say, what the faces seem to convey, "It thinks, it hurts." The Psalmist says, "create in us clean hearts, deliver us from bloodshed, O God... for you have no delight in sacrifice; if we were to give you a burnt offering, you would not be pleased."

And when we hear the truth, it hurts, it saddens us as well. Jesus said, " 'Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' And when [the rich young man] heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich."

...the miracle...

Truly - we need that miracle - we need the camel to go through the eye of the needle. We need, we need, we need.

When we walk around to the back of Ron's sculpture, we discover that that thick and heavy spine we saw from the inside is actually a deep, open channel along the back bone. At the base is a clay cup, filled with water. And planted in the cup is a stem of green and climbing ivy from the

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garden. Its leaves travel up the back and climb a tiny bit over the top of the torso. Miriam's poem follows suit. Humans, she writes, imagines.

No grave can hold it -
this skin and bone and beating heart.

We have to go back to the green and life-giving garden.

We have to go back to the fast that Adam and Eve broke.

Like the poem says, I think we can only imagine what this means. So, indeed we do this by accepting the invitation that Jesus has, "come and follow me." And when we accept the invitation - I believe that we accept the fast as well.

Marjorie Thompson writes:

When [Jesus] became hungry, he refused the lie that life depends upon bread alone and reaffirmed that human beings depend in all things upon God for life. He said no to the limitless... power Satan tempted him with... Jesus "kept the fast," abstaining not only from food but from the illegitimate exercise of power. He accepted human limits, living within the normal constraints of human life and accepting a human death.... Through him, we too begin to live as a "new creation." ... Perhaps we can see then, that the discipline of fasting has to do with ...accepting those limits which are life-restoring. Our culture would seduce us into believing that we can have it all, do it all...deserve it all. ... in refusing to accept limits on our consumption or activity, we perpetuate a death-dealing dynamic in the world. That is why the discipline of fasting is so important today. (pp. 73-4)

I want to close by telling you a story that is unfolding in our Reformed family today.

I've mentioned before that I've been getting to know some of the Native Americans here in Grand Rapids because of the World Communion of Reformed Churches conference that was held here this summer.

Part of what we did was help to arrange for the Native American community to welcome the visitors from around the world to this land here. At an opening ceremony, representatives of some of the 49 tribes that are represented in Grand Rapids stood on stage. Part of this ceremony was a gift exchange between the elders of the tribes and the leaders of the new communion. The Indians presented the traditional gift - a small pouch of dried grasses and herbs. And the presidents of the Reformed church organizations presented the Indians with a sword.

But this was no ordinary sword. It was a sword that had been heated and hammered into the bent and curved shaped of a plowshare. A statement was made that is was time for those of us who are all ancestors of the Puritans - to beat the sword of our relationship with the Native Americans - with all indigenous people - into plowshares.

One of the Presbyterian First Nations people from Canada, who was on the stage, told me that she burst into tears. For you see, in her tribe, the name for the Europeans who came was "the sword people."

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My friend Mike Peters - a Native American pastor here in Grand Rapids - has been entrusted with the sword. He has traveled with it a bit and told the story to other Native people. Listen to his words about one such gathering:

As I shared ...how the bent sword was presented to symbolically show the intent of their heart I brought out the actual sword. At that moment Native people started to cry and asked, "Do you really feel that this is more than empty words?" I told them that these people have good eyes and that we are going to see a new day... The power of the sword is bringing hope to Native people....

This is the miracle - my friends - it has already happened - no grave can hold it.

This is what God desires of us. May we, with the help of God, make it our one and only desire as well.

Let go of everything else as best you can...

Fast as an act of repentance - for the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken and contrite heart born of the truth.

Fast as a way of cleansing, so there is room for the desire of God to grow a clean heart - with an open and ungrasping hand extended to all. Amen