

March 7, 2021
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Matthew 6:16-18
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

What to Do When We Don't Know What to Do: Fasting

Matthew 6:16-18

New Revised Standard Version

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

There are lots of words that you only hear in church. Words like doxology or altar. One word you usually only hear in church is fasting. You often hear about fasting during Lent when we are in these forty days of reflection and preparation before the celebration of Easter. Lent is a dark season when we see Jesus move toward his own death. It is a time for us to turn our face to the suffering of the world. I hope that Lent will be an opportunity for you to take a deep breath and ground yourself in God.

This Lent at Greenland Hills we are focusing on spiritual practices to help center ourselves in God as we experience and practice prayer, scripture reading, fasting, confession, worship and silence in our daily lives. When we don't know what to do, we go back to the basics of spiritual disciplines. When we don't know what to do, spiritual practices help connect us with God and can help us to experience God in new ways. Since practice is an important part of spiritual practice, Lent is the perfect opportunity to take the time to learn and perfect, explore and polish our spiritual practices.

When I hear the word fasting, I immediately think of food. Traditionally fasting has meant the voluntary abstention from food for a prescribed period as a sign of religious devotion. In Jesus' day, people would fast from food, but they would also wear sackcloth, put ashes on their head, and not wash themselves. Fasting was a sign of repentance, of mourning, or devotion to prayer. In my studying this week I learned that fasting in Jesus' day was done on Mondays and Thursdays. The first Methodist, John Wesley, fasted on Fridays and he encouraged Methodists to do the same. From sundown on Thursday until 3 pm on Friday John Wesley would not eat and instead pray. There are different versions of fasting from John Wesley's practice. You can drink water only or only have liquids. You can eat everything except meat. You can try to eat more simply so that you have more time to talk to God. John and his brother Charles Wesley would have a simple meal of milk and bread so they had more time for prayer.

I have to admit to you that I am horrible at fasting from food. One year I was teaching a Bible Study class and we agreed to not eat dinner before our class. We were going to fast from one meal and donate the money that we would have spent on food. I would get home from that Bible Study and I would be starving so I would ransack the pantry. I wasn't doing fasting correctly. If you do fast from a meal, you need to spend that time in prayer. I wasn't praying, I was just not eating. We are supposed to accompany fasting with prayer.

Thinking again of food as it relates to fasting, we think of eating fish on Fridays as a way to fast from meat. But we can fast from so many different things. We can fast from hurting words and instead say kind words. We can fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude. We can fast from anger and be filled with patience. We can fast from pessimism and be filled with hope. We can fast from worries and have trust in God. We can fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity. We can fast from pressures and be prayerful. We can fast from bitterness and fill our hearts with joy. We can fast from selfishness and be compassionate. We can fast from grudges and be reconciled. We can fast from words and instead be silent so we can listen. We can invest

the time that we would normally spend watching TV or surfing on the internet focusing on and our families.

The hope is that this Lent we will form some habits and routines that work for us and support our lives. This is a time to experiment with different patterns and routines so we can find one that we can carry forward after Lent. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that reminds us of the transformation that occurs when we deny ourselves of something and put our trust in God. Fasting is meant to change our hearts and deepen our relationship with God. It isn't about a diet or a show as our scripture passage for today reminds us. Fasting is about filling your heart with gratitude, patience, strength and peace.

Writer Richard Foster who wrote the book *Celebration of Discipline* said, "Fasting must forever center on God. More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us." Is there something in your life that you can't live without? Can you step away from it for a day, or a week, or until Easter? What would that teach you? When I fast from something, even when it is just for a day, it helps make clear to me what I want to change about my heart and how I spend my time.

In the past I have not eaten sugar, caffeine, alcohol, or carbs during Lent, but I didn't grow or learn anything from that experience. I did it more for show because look at me, I have willpower. Denying ourselves something is supposed to help us refocus our minds and hearts and deepen our faith. We do spiritual disciplines to have our hearts changed. We pray, we read scripture, we fast with the intention of worshipping God. We shouldn't do any of these things to make a good impression or to prove ourselves in front of other people.

In the passage we read from Matthew's gospel, Jesus is asking us when we do these voluntary acts of spiritual discipline, like fasting, what is our goal? Is it to impress other people or is it an act of devotion to God? Jesus says not to call attention to yourself by wearing sackcloth, placing ashes on your head, or not washing or combing your hair. Jesus says to not tell everyone that you see what you are doing. Instead get dressed, brush your hair, and wash your face, because only God needs to know about what you are doing. God is the focus of your fast, not gaining attention or admiration from others. We fast to grow closer to God.

Fasting is a personal and private decision. What we fast from should be between God and us, no one else. Fasting helps us remember that we worship God not only with our minds and hearts, but with our whole bodies. It is important for me to say that if you struggle with an eating disorder or are trying to go on a diet or lose weight, fasting from food is not a wise choice. Fasting should never be about not nourishing or caring for our bodies, which are given to us by God. There are so many choices that we have for fasting. We can fast from watching TV or spending money unnecessarily. Fasting helps center us on God and reveals those things that control us.

We can choose to fast or renew our fast at any point. We can choose to change what we are fasting from or shift how we are fasting. Fasting calls us to be uncomfortable so we can become more aware of what comforts us, so we can turn to God with purpose, and deepen our connection with God.

Fasting is meant to change our hearts and deepen our relationship with God. With your Lent activity bag for week three of Lent, there is a small red heart. This heart is meant to be a visual reminder of the commitments we make to God from our own hearts. I want to encourage you to pick one item to fast or abstain from for one day, two days, or even the entire week if you would like. You could fast from social media, from technology, from news, from shopping, from stress, from Starbucks, or from a snack or a meal. During the time that you would have been

doing that thing, write a letter to someone you love or sit outside and feel the breeze on your face.

May this be a time for you of growing closer to God. Draw me nearer, nearer blessed Lord. Today and all days. Thanks be to God, Amen.