

Series: HOLY LIVING: Inward Spiritual Disciplines
Sermon: Fasting

Leviticus 23:26-28

The Lord said to Moses, 27 “The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present a food offering to the Lord. 28 Do not do any work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the Lord your God.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

3 The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

5 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. 7 If you worship me, it will all be yours.”

8 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

9 The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. 10 For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;

11

they will lift you up in their hands,

so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

12 Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Sermon

I have my annual physical coming up. Yippy Skippy. And as a part of the annual physical, there will be a few routine blood tests and pokings and proddings. More Yippy Skippy. But one of the rules that the doc gave was to fast for 12 hours before the exam. No eating, no drinking (besides water). Does this doctor even know me? How in the world can I possibly go without eating or snacking or (gasp) soda pop for that long? Yes, I scheduled the appointment at 9 in the morning, so after 9 p.m. the night before, I am cut off. Oh the humanity, the suffering. The trials and tribulations. Honestly, I’ll be fine, but isn’t it funny - the minute you can’t have something is precisely when you want to have it.

When you were told you couldn’t have a toy as a kid, the tantrum was inevitable; you wanted it even more than before. When you were a teenager and your parents said you couldn’t stay out late or go to parties, it only fueled your defiant desire to go out. As a 20-something, it’s likely that when you’re drawn to someone and discover he or she is in a relationship, you find yourself falling even harder. What is this fixation on the forbidden fruit, and why does it control so many aspects of our lives? There are pros to this phenomenon. Someone outright telling you that you’re incapable of getting that promotion -- well, it drives your determination to achieve it. I once knew a girl whose math skills were less than stellar, and her family would joke too often that she could never be an accountant. Something about their poking fun must have struck a chord with her because she spent the next 12 years trying to prove otherwise. By 25, she was holding a steady job in accounting, one that her family never

expected her to have. Sometimes, though, there is a downside to this inexplicable instinct. Sometimes we go too far for what we're told we can't have, even overstepping moral code or hurting others in the process. During a study published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, women were presented with a photograph of their potential dream man. Half of the women were told their Mr. Right was single; while the other half were told he was in a relationship. The photographs were the same across all participants. Though 59 percent were interested in pursuing the single guy, that figure jumped to 90 percent when they were under the impression he was already in a committed relationship. It's certainly not uncommon for someone to pursue someone else who is already happily married. However, this brings up a whole host of questions: Is it simply that something illicit feels more exciting? Is it our competitive human nature that fuels our desire to "win" someone if he or she is taken? Apparently, our urge to go after the unattainable is in our DNA.

Today's sermon is about fasting - denying ourselves, on purpose, food that keeps us going. Why would we do such a thing? Why is fasting even a thing? Who in their right mind would begin such as tradition? Yes, we live in the land that has the Golden arches as our temple, And we sometimes fight to the death over what pizza place is best in town (Pioneer's Pizza). Fasting is not in our common experience. We hear of other religions that fast in what seems all of the time - The Jews fast on the day of Atonement, as taught in our scripture lesson today. The Muslims have Ramadan coming up, where there is fasting from sunrise to sunset for around a month. The Muslim calendar is lunar based, so each lunar cycle is a "month". But they shift over time - the months move 11 days compared to our calendar. So Ramadan is sometimes in the summer, sometimes in the winter. This year, it's in May. It's easier to fast in the winter when the days are short.

Jesus spoke about fasting as if it was already a common custom of the early Christians. In the Sermon on the Mount, he talks about fasting as an ongoing practice. "When you fast", he says, "don't contort your face" and whine about not eating. (Paraphrased). Just like when he said, "When you pray", or "When you give." His words are not constituting a command, however. He was giving instruction on the proper exercise of a common practice in his day. You did not say, "If you fast." He also didn't say, "You MUST fast". His word is, very simply, When you fast.

The great preacher John Wesley made an observation about fasting that reminds of how customary fasting was in a former era: "While we were at Oxford the rule of every Methodist was (unless in case of sickness) to fast every Wednesday and Friday in the year, in imitation of the primitive church, for which they had the highest reverence." But fasting among the Methodists began to shift noticeably even as Wesley aged.

Said Wesley, "And I fear there are now thousands of Methodists, so called, both in England and Ireland, who, following the same bad example, have entirely left off fasting; who are so far from fasting twice a week (as all the stricter Pharisees did) that they do not fast twice in the month. Yea, are there not some of you who do not fast one day, from the beginning of the year to the end?"

And he cut the Methodists of his day no slack because fasting was for Wesley symbolic of spirituality itself: "Since, according to this, the man that never fasts is no more in the way to heaven than the man that never prays."

Ouch. (If you're a Methodist hearing this—and most of you are—please direct any complaint emails to our founder, not to me.) Even though it's uncomfortable for me to say, that somehow we've dropped the ball on this ancient practice. John Wesley wouldn't even consider someone to become a pastor if they did not fast. I'd be up a creek, unless I had a physical and blood work every week.

Wesley wanted to practice fasting as it was represented in the Bible and in the majority of centuries of Christian history. Though he recognized that fasts of different kinds occurred in scripture, he saw the normal fast as abstaining from food for one day.

Whatever the details of it, and whatever the frequency, if we want to find a Methodism that has similar effects in moving us toward God as experienced by Wesley and his early Methodists, it is certain that he would insist that our routines include fasting.

Of course, the whole purpose towards fasting is just a reminder of how much we depend on God. He provides. He is our strength. Who else fasted? Lets check out the Bible. Moses to David to Elijah to Esther to Daniel, to Anna, to Paul, to Jesus Christ of all people 40 days in the desert rings a bell. In our church's history great leaders fast, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, Charles Spurgeon. Leaders from many different faiths, many different backgrounds.

How to fast? That is up to you and your Doctor. But it is amazing that as life-giving as food, we do not consider the intentionality of what we stuff our face with, or not stuff our face with. If you want to try a new way to connect with your environment, with your body, with your God, consider trying a fast some day. Like we said in our Meditation sermon two weeks ago, we empty ourselves of the bad, and fill in with the good. When we don't fill ourselves with food, we can fill ourselves with the Spirit, with intentionality.

In closing, just a word on the opposite of Fasting. If fasting is to NOT EAT for a period of time, then what is it when we stuff our face continually? Here's a hint, it's one of the classic "Deadly Sins." Gluttony. Latin word for devour. Total consumption. Wouldn't the opposite of a deadly sin be an OK practice? The devil tempted Jesus with Food. The Devil tempted Adam and Eve with what? An apple. Food is a nice little tool of the evil one. Let you be in charge of what goes in your mouth. That's a horrible line to end a sermon on: You are in charge of your pie hole. And the family of God said, AMEN.