

Fasting Leads to Hope

Oct. 13, 2019 / Fasting: Making Room - Isaiah 58:1-9; John 6:27-35

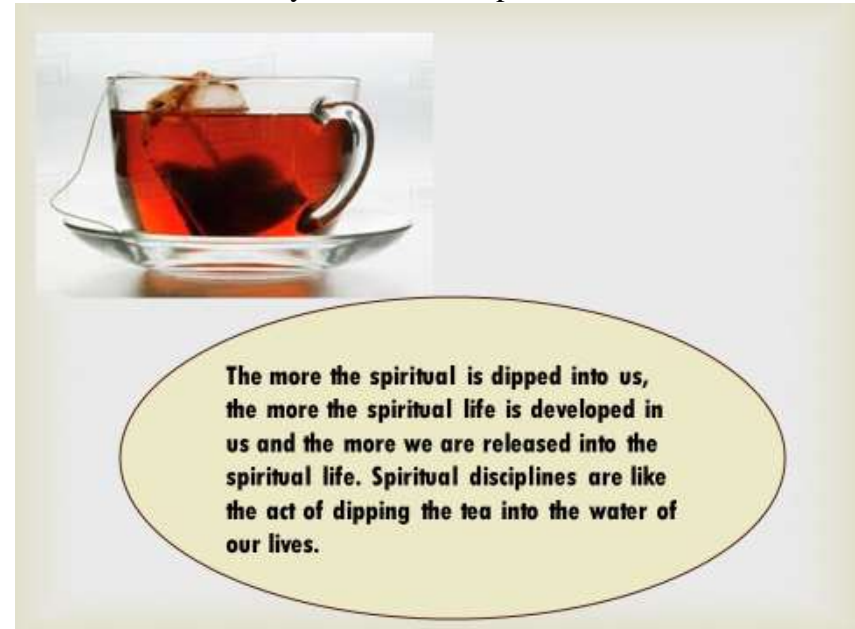
The Lord be with you. This morning, as Steve/Debbie said, we are beginning a series on spiritual practices. Another name for that are spiritual disciplines. Now if I'm going to be honest with you when I hear the words spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices my first reaction is not, "Oh boy, this is going to be great!" No, it's more like, "Oh boy, this is going to be like piano lessons all over again." Can you hear the joy in my voice when I say it that way? I did not like practicing the piano when I was a kid.

But yet, somehow, if we as Christians are going to survive and thrive in this world that so subtly pulls us away from God, that denies the spiritual dimension of who we are, we are going to need to practice. And that is where spiritual practices come in. Like playing the piano, our spiritual lives are not automatic. We need to practice.

Maybe another way to think about this is, if you had piano lessons as kid and it left less than ideal memories for you is to think about making tea. Now, suppose you were to make some tea. You have hot water and a tea bag. To make the tea, you must dip the bag in the water, right? If you were to just plunge the bag in once or twice, it would not make for very good tea. If, instead, you continuously submerge the tea bag into the water, the flavor of the tea will grow much stronger. The longer the tea leaves are immersed into the water, the more the water gets into the tea and the more the tea is released into the water.



This is the way it is with our spiritual life.



The more the spiritual is dipped into us, the more the spiritual life is developed in us and the more we are released into the spiritual life. Spiritual disciplines are like the act of dipping the tea into the water of our lives. The more we practice the various disciplines, the stronger we grow spiritually. The disciplines make way for Christ to be formed in us.

Now it should be noted

IN/MI Conference Renewing a Vision
Shared Spiritual Practices

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- ❧ 1. Worship God as the central act of our common life.
- ❧ 2. Practice prayer, fasting and generous giving.
- ❧ 3. Prayerfully study the Bible together.
- ❧ 4. Accept and offer hospitality.
- ❧ 5. Study the Bible with neighbors and strangers, inviting them to become disciples of Jesus.
- ❧ 6. Practice peacemaking.


❧ Renewing a Vision (RaV) states IMMC focus: We center conference life around Jesus and engage in six spiritual practices.

that over the last couple of years IN MI Conference has laid out its direction forward for Conference's future and it is entitled *Renewing a Vision*. And part of their framework involves *Shared Spiritual Practices* which you see on the screen. It is from the understanding that over time we are shaped by what we pay attention to and the habits we form. And their desire is that we engage in practices that continually bend us toward Christ to help us stay centered on Jesus even in the midst of differences.

These next number of Sundays as we think about *Spiritual Practices*, we, as a congregation, are doing this because we felt that this is important for us to do; to pay attention to this part of our lives. Conference didn't tell us to do this but it is nice to know that what we doing is being shared by others in our Conference.

This morning we begin with the practice of fasting. And I would guess that in this day and age, most people associate it with what you do before

Fasting
~
Making Room for God



you go to the doctor to have blood drawn. Not much fun not being able to eat and quite frankly, it's really not much fun getting poked by a needle. What's so spiritual about that?

I can relate because I have to have blood draws every month. But over the years I have started to think about it this way. Fasting as making room. Yes, making room for the needle. But more importantly, making room so the doctor can see what is going on inside of me. And as I have had to battle my fears and the uncertainties that come with each blood draw, it has taken on a more significant moment of being mindful, of making room for God. More on this in a minute.

Before we get too far into this I want to think for a moment about today's texts from Isaiah and John concerning fasting and feeding / less food and more food.



And this is going to feel like a rabbit hole we are going to go down here for a moment but they are significant....because of wrong reasons and right reasons. And by that I simply mean that humanity between the time of Isaiah and Jesus hadn't really changed.



Because the "fast" in Isaiah was for the wrong reason. "What's in it for me? I'm doing this fast God, now you do what you are supposed to do" said the people of Isaiah's time. But God wasn't and God didn't. And why was that? Isaiah 58 paints a picture of a group of people who thought of God as transactional and a fast had come to mean a way to control God for their own self-interest.

And John's story.



It's about food but it's still about what's in it for "ME." The context is that this story from John happens right after Jesus feeds the 5000 at the beginning of the 6th chapter. And now people are coming..... "He's a prophet....who gives away free food! I want some of that! Give me a sign, feed me again so I can believe!"

But here is what is so significant about these stories of less food or more food. I don't know why John doesn't include it in his telling of the story because Matthew, Mark and Luke do. But the words to the disciples from Jesus are illuminating for it picks up right where Isaiah leaves off. Do you remember what those words are when the disciples tell Jesus there is no food for the people and he should send them home? Jesus responds by saying,

The right reasons
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"You give them something to eat!"




them something to eat."

"You give

And Isaiah? Isaiah's prophetic

The right reasons
~
"You give them something to eat!"



Isaiah 58 - Fasting (less food)

- o Economic injustice & violence:
 - inhibits seeking God
 - indicates a deficiency in our spiritual practices.
- o Isaiah will not let us sit comfortably in an inner spirituality that does not work toward justice in our world.

voice will not allow the people of God to seek repentance and providence through their fasts without their participation in justice. In other words, "You give them something to eat!"

There is something profound and deeply troubling about all this as these words from Isaiah and John ricochet down through

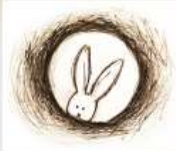
history landing with a "thud" on our doorstep here in the 21st century. What Isaiah is implying here is that on the one hand our seeking after God is inhibited by the economic injustices and violence in our midst. These injustices are overwhelming and demoralizing. It feels like there is nothing we can do so we throw our hands up in a sense of hopelessness and do... nothing. In our nation, in other nations, this is what is taking place and this sense of hopelessness inhibits seeking God.

And the flip side of that, the other side of the coin is that the presence of such oppression and violence indicates a deficiency in our spiritual practices. Ouch! That's harsh....but that is what Isaiah is driving at here, relaying God's frustration, God's anger with God's people. Part of what is wrong here is that, "you're not giving them something to eat!"

Isaiah will not let us sit comfortably in an inner spirituality that does not work toward justice in our world. The fasting desired by God is that we lose the chains of injustice and set the oppressed free. That is that God of Isaiah 58.

And Jesus in our John passage? The easiest way is to just use the words of Jesus.

The right reasons
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"You give them something to eat!"



<p>Isaiah 58 - Fasting (less food)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Economic injustice & violence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - inhibits seeking God - indicates a deficiency in our spiritual practices. o Isaiah will not let us sit comfortably in an inner spirituality that does not work toward justice in our world. 	<p>John 6 - Feeding (more food)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o "For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven <u>and gives life to the world.</u>" o Jesus teaches us to believe and follow a God that is not removed from the pains and injustices of this world.
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“For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life...to...the...world. Not death to the world; but life to the world. I am the bread of life” says Jesus. This is the kind of God that God is; a God who wants to give life to the world. And if the work of God is this; that we believe in the one whom God has sent, then our faith is not removed from the concerns of our neighbor because we pray to a God that is not removed from the pains and injustices of this world.

The God of Isaiah 58 is the same God as John 6. And there is our rabbit hole for this sermon...but it is an important rabbit hole. What kind of God are we dealing with here in this morning’s texts? And do I have room in my heart, my spirit, my life for this kind of God? I would venture a guess that no matter who is preaching during this series, no matter what the practice or discipline is, it is all going to come back to this; making room for God and it is important to know what kind of God we are making room for.

Sometimes we are like the people of Isaiah’s time. We are crying out for deliverance, for answers, for divine presence. We hunger, we thirst for something. And we cry out. It is a deep guttural cry. Our pain makes room for God.

Sometimes we are like the people in the Gospel of John. If we are going to make room for God we need some kind of assurance, some guarantee. “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” (John 6:30). The unknown is hard. And making room for God comes harder when we don’t want to let go of things...especially control.

But here is where fasting comes in. Perhaps no other discipline, no other practice gets at this like fasting does. I mentioned earlier fasting so that the doctor could see what was going on inside of me physiologically. Maybe the way to think of fasting is as a way for us to see what is going on inside of us spiritually.



Because fasting, if we are paying attention, has a way of revealing the things inside that control us.


We tend first and foremost to think about fasting as depriving ourselves of food. It is certainly the biblical understanding. As one deprives oneself of food, if we are paying attention we begin to notice things.



We notice things because we tend to cover-up what is inside of us with food and other good/bad things. But in fasting these things that we are trying to cover-up rise to the surface.

We may become angry, grumpy. That is not always just a physiological reaction to lack of food. If pride controls us, that will be revealed almost as quickly. Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear (yes)...if they are within us, they will surface as we fast. At first we may rationalize these things. "I'm just hungry". But yet, if we pay attention we may come to find that no, it's not just hunger. No, there is something else going on here. I really do have a spirit of fear, anxiety, anger...whatever inside me. Fasting reveals these things.

Fasting ~ Making Room for God
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A way to see what is going on inside of us spiritually




- We tend to cover-up what is inside of us with food and other good and sometimes bad things. But in fasting these things that we are trying to cover-up rise to the surface.
- As things are revealed, we don't need to be defeated. Offers direction forward, realization of things that need to be healed that we can offer to God.
- Realization that Christ is alive and goes before us into these places and spaces.

But rather than be defeated by this, I choose to look at it as something I can rejoice in. Awareness of something offers us the direction forward. Because I now know what it is that needs to be healed. I know what it is that I can offer to God. And I want to do this because I have learned over the years that healing is available through the power of the risen Christ! For me personally, when I am fasting before my labs and fear is present, I am mindful that Christ is alive and goes before me, is present in whatever the results will be. Amen?

And in this process fasting reminds us that we are, that we can be,

Fasting ~ Making Room for God
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Fasting is Feasting!




- Fasting reminds us that we are, that we can be sustained "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4.4).

sustained "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4.4). This is from when Jesus was in the wilderness fasting and Satan is tempting him. It's not that Jesus is simply not eating physical food here; he is feasting on the word of God. That is why he responds the way he does to the things that were rising up.

Food does not sustain us in these moments. Food does not sustain me when I'm facing my fears. At best it covers it up as I anxiously eat. God sustains me in my fears. I need, you need to feast on God in Christ.

In Christ, "all things hold together" says Paul in Colossians 1. 17. It's that wonderful passage of the Supremacy of Christ; how Christ was before all things, created all things and holds all things together, reconciling them and making peace through the cross.


Fasting ~ Making Room for God
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Fasting is Feasting!




- o Fasting reminds us that we are, that we can be sustained "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4.4).
- o "He (Christ) is before all things and in him all things hold together." Col. 1:17
- o In experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are engaging in the process of feasting on the word of God.

In Christ, my fear is not absolved or removed or even denied. In Christ, it is held in its proper place; it does not rule. That happens because in experiences like fasting, we are not so much abstaining from food as we are engaging in the process of feasting on the word of God.

Fasting ~ Making Room for God
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Fasting is Feasting!



- o Find the way that works best for you. No one size fits all.



Feasting on the word of God works best for me in these moments through music. I can read scripture but I find that is only resonates intellectually. Nothing wrong with that, but music that contains scriptural words works best for feasting for me in these moments. There is something

about music that activates, makes the words of God to come alive and touch my spirit in a way that simply reading them doesn't. It acts as the tea bag from my cup of tea. Removing food forces the issue. And the tea bag starts to get dipped longer and longer into my cup.


And as I make room for God, as the spiritual grows in me, do you know what I find happening in this process?

Fasting ~ Making Room for God
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Fasting Leads to **Hope!**



HOPE! Hope. And here is where the rabbit hole we just went down comes back into play. Jesus responds to us as he did the crowd "This is the work of God; that you believe in him whom God has sent" (John 6:29). Hope through belief is this: :

Fasting ~ Making Room for God
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Fasting Leads to **Hope! In Belief....**




- o To believe in him whom God has sent" (John 6:29) is to ...
- o Trust that God is doing something new that human created conditions; that human created circumstances cannot undermine or negate. (Isaiah)
- o Submit everything, especially the things we want to control, to God's saving work in Jesus. (John)
- o Understand that it is not so much what we do as it is being open to what God is doing and responding to that. (Today)

- To trust that God is doing something new that human created conditions, that human created circumstances cannot undermine or negate. (Isaiah). Don't despair about current things.
- To have hope through belief is to submit everything, especially the things we want to control, to God's saving work in Jesus. (John)
- To have hope through belief is to understand that it is not so much what we do (do the right thing in the right way) as it is being open to what God is doing and responding to that.

And if that is HOPE through BELIEF, here is HOPE through PRACTICE. Read with me.

Fasting ~ Making Room for God

Fasting Leads to Hope! *In Practice....*




- o If we, in fasting, discover that Jesus is the bread that fulfills all our hunger, then Jesus has freed us to embrace God's redeeming will to restore creation.
- o In other words, if Jesus has given me (Terry) something to eat so that my fear does not consume me, I am free to give you something to eat. I am freed up to enter into God's work of restoration and justice. I am making room for the God of Isaiah 58 and John 6. I am living in hope.

If we, in fasting, discover that Jesus is the bread that fulfills all our hunger, then Jesus has freed us to embrace God's redeeming will to restore creation. In other words, if Jesus has given me (Terry) something to eat so that my fear does not consume me, I am free to give you something to eat. I am freed up to enter into God's work of restoration and justice. I am making room for the God of Isaiah 58 and John 6. I am living in hope.

Thomas Merton, who was a Trappist monk from the Abbey of Gethsemane down in Kentucky provides the correct image for this when he wrote that "hope empties our hands, so that we can work with them." "You give them something to eat" says Jesus.

James An-gell, former pastor at Claremont Presbyterian Church in Claremont, California, from the last century wrote in his book, "Yes is a World", History...he wrote these words.



"Hope empties our hands so we can work with them." ~ Thomas Merton
No Man is an Island p. 14

~ James W. Angell Yes is a World p. 26 - 28

"When we live in hope, we help hope to happen. Hope is in faith's blood. Hope is not simply the vision of a future paradise. It is also the centering of our confidence in God in a way which liberates us from worry, tension and an eternal paralysis of analysis. It is the art of learning to rest our anxieties in the adequacy of God."

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I really like that last line. Fasting and Feasting, I believe, helps us get in touch with HOPE; because it helps to make room for God in our lives. Fasting and Feasting is the art of learning to rest our anxieties in the adequacy of God. So dip that tea bag in a little longer and let the Spirit seep into your life a little deeper this week.

Ritual of Ribbon / Cloth