

Fasting – for Lent and Our Year Round Christian Life

Janet Schaeffler, OP

There is a story from the past about a foolish old woman who talked to God (and God talked to her). She had no idea what a privilege this was. It so happened that one day shortly before Lent the old woman prayed:

“How should I fast, O God; should I eat less bread and butter?”

“Don't you know by now,” God answered, “That fasting goes far beyond food? It has to do with what is in your heart. Therefore, fast from gossip and criticism, fast from envy and anger, fast from boasting and greed. Fast from all that harms or saddens another.”

“O God,” the old woman prayed, “How little you know about fasting! I'll eat less bread and butter!”

Fasting is one of the three traditional Lenten practices (along with prayer and almsgiving). Fasting – and prayer and works of justice – form the core of the Christian life. How can any one of them be quarantined to just one season of the liturgical year? They are all constitutive of our lives throughout the entire year.

Lent is a retreat time of the year to stop and look at our lives and deepen who we are in relationship to God and to one another. It is a

time to concentrate more deeply on practices/attitudes which, hopefully then, will become more permanent in our lives for the rest of the year.

To return to our story – as well as the Church's tradition – the old woman was thinking about fasting from food. That is part of our Church's tradition. Why do we do that?

It is not because our bodies need to be punished (or to go on a diet).

We fast to allow our physical hunger to remind us of our spiritual hunger, our need for God. Modeled on Jesus' fasting, who fasted in preparation for his baptism and ministry, we fast to remind ourselves of our baptismal commitment and need for renewal. We are hungry – hungry for God, and the reign of God. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.” (Mt. 5:6)

Secondly, it not only reminds us of our dependence on God, but on the needs of others, the hungry and the poor. Fasting is a Gospel value, but not fasting by itself. Fasting and almsgiving are Gospel twins. Our tradition of fasting has never been to purge, to deprive the body for deprivation sake, but to have more to give away.

We fast in order to place ourselves in solidarity with the poor and hungry. If the grocery money saved by our fasting does not somehow help feed the poor and hungry then our fasting is empty and useless.

In our story, God says fasting goes beyond food. Is God right?

The key question about fasting is: What is the purpose of my fasting? What is cluttering my landscape so I can't see God's landscape? What distracts modern day people from an intimate relationship with God and God's people/creation?

What can I let go of, do without, do with less of, that will make my life better, that will put me in touch with God, which will make me more aware of others' needs?

Consider fasting from (not just during Lent – but perhaps once a week, once a month, all the time ...):

- speech and conversation that includes violent language; fast from violent movies, videos and TV shows
- swearing, gossip, racist jokes, etc.
- frivolous purchases. Have you looked in your closets, storage room, garage and cupboards lately? Have you collected any things that you were convinced you needed – until you got them home and had second thoughts?
- your favorite shopping store (or mall)
- guzzling gas. Drive the speed limit. Walk or ride your bike when you can.
- instant gratification. Stop a moment to reexamine cravings and hungers, yearnings, compulsions, and impulses.
- the unnecessary noise in your life

- worry. Does it express your desire to exercise power over the outcome of events?
- having the last word. People who always have the last word tend to be people who don't listen enough or who lecture too much.

What about trying one – or more - of these - all the time:

- Fast from emphasis on difference; feast on the unity of all life.
- Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.
- Fast from anger; feast on patience.
- Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.
- Fast from facts that depress; feast on realities that uplift.
- Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.
- Fast from self concern; feast on compassion for others.
- Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.
- Fast from unrelenting pressures; feast on unceasing prayer.
- Fast from judging others; feast on Christ dwelling in them.

www.janetschaeffler.com

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