

“Are You Giving Up? Anything?”

Date: February 19, 2015 Place: Westminster Presbyterian Church
Occasion: Lenten Lunch series Text: Matthew 6:16-18
Theme: Fasting

Are you giving up (pause) *anything* for Lent? I purposely paused to get your attention. Most of us are not quitters and we don't want anyone accusing us of being quitters. I hope I got your attention. Because now I want to ask you, seriously, have you decided yet to do any kind of a fast this Lent?

Katherin Chavez, writing in the United Methodist publication called *The Interpreter*, says: “Lent is the time of year when many Christians seek the truth behind the paradox of subtraction equals addition.” She was referring to the spiritual discipline of fasting, practiced not just by Christians, but also by many other religions including Judaism and Islam.

“Fasting, practiced faithfully by biblical figures, is coming back into vogue. More and more Christians, today, find the spiritual discipline brings enlightenment and enrichment to their lives.” (Chavez) We are all probably more acquainted with such disciplines as prayer and Bible study and worship.

So, even though fasting *is* overshadowed by those disciplines, it is a biblical practice that can foster revival, healing and greater intimacy with God. Scripture cites fasting dozens of times: from Moses to Esther to Jesus and to the earliest Christians. Perhaps the best-known instance, for Christians, is found in today's lesson, when Jesus commands, “*When you fast....*”

Jesus assumes that his disciples will fast. And He warns us to look inward for God's blessings, rather than outward for attention and worldly approval. Fasting is a tool that God has given to us so that we can grow spiritually. So, why fast and pray? There are many good reasons.

One, fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the sight of God. Psalm 35:13 says, “When they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting.” King David said, “I humble myself through fasting.”

Two, when we fast it enables the Holy Spirit to reveal our true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance and a transformed life.” If you

want to keep a holy Lent, you ask God to reveal where you need to change. Fasting can assist the Holy Spirit in revealing to you where you need to repent.

Third, when you fast the Holy Spirit will quicken the Word of God in your heart, and God's truth will become more meaningful for you. Combine fasting with both prayer and Bible study, and God will empower your spiritual life.

Fourth, fasting can transform your prayer life into a richer and more personal experience. Fasting and prayer are almost always mentioned together in the Bible.

So what should you fast from? Some people choose to fast from a particular type of food: such as sweets, or some choose to fast from eating meat during Lent. Others choose a day during the week to fast. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, suggested noontime on Thursdays till Friday night dinner.

That may not work so well for those of us who have come to these luncheons. So why not pick a different 24 hours to abstain from eating food? Maybe Friday lunch till Saturday dinner?

If you're abstaining from all foods, you need to drink liquids frequently. You may drink juices to keep your body hydrated with necessary vitamins. Vegetable juice or chicken broth could be a great choice for a dinner meal.

The fast is a spiritual discipline designed to better connect us with God. We are fasting in order to deepen our relationship with God and to walk in step with His plan and purpose. When we experience ourselves feeling hungry, or feeling deprived of that food we have given up, we turn to God in prayer.

We re-direct our attention from the thing we crave, to the One who supplies all our needs. If you're skipping meals, substitute your meal-time with prayer time, Bible reading, and journaling. Write down what you're feeling and experiencing. The over-all goal is to experience a genuine hunger for spending time with God.

The Bible rarely mentions fasting apart from prayer. Simply depriving yourself of food amounts to little, if not accompanied by a hunger for God that leads to prayer, which in turns opens a spigot of spiritual sustenance for the heart

and soul. By denying our appetite for physical food, it allows God to lead us to a banquet hall of spiritual nourishment.

Not everyone is led to give up food for their Lenten fast. You might try an electronic fast. Give up TV, texting, tweeting, email. Try doing it for one day a week, or every day of Lent. Use the time to read and pray.

You might try giving up soft drinks, fast food, tea or coffee, especially if you like to buy those drinks and food when you're out and about. Give the money you save to a charity that helps others.

Or perhaps you might try giving up a behavior that you feel God is asking you to change. Some people use Lent to give up smoking cigarettes. Normally a Lenten fast is not used for personal, self-improvement projects, but if God is leading you to make a change in your life, you might use these six weeks as a spiritual fast, rather than as a show of will power.

Or, maybe you would want to give up an attitude that isn't very Christ-like. Bishop Arthur Lichtenberger wrote this list, that I find wonderfully suggestive:

- Fast from criticism, and feast on praise.
- Fast from self-pity, and feast on joy.
- Fast from ill-temper, and feast on peace.
- Fast from resentment, and feast on contentment.
- Fast from jealousy, and feast on love.
- Fast from pride, and feast on humility.
- Fast from selfishness, and feast on service.
- Fast from fear, and feast on faith.

So let me ask you again – are you giving up anything for Lent? Christ assumed that his followers would fast. He didn't say, "*If you fast,*" he said, "*When you fast,*" assuming that we would. I invite you to consider what you will give up this Lent, so that you can enter into a deeper, richer, more meaningful relationship with God.

In today's food-centered society, fasting might seem outdated. But it remains an important pathway to humility and intimacy with God. Richard Foster in his now-classic book *Celebration of Discipline* says, "Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that will never happen in any other way." I invite us to keep a holy Lent, subtracting, so that God can add to our lives. Amen? Amen.