

Fasting: An Old Fashioned Piety or a valuable Spiritual Practice?

Sermon for Ash Wednesday February 22, 2012

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There are many instances of fasting in the Bible. Here is one from the Book of the Prophet Jonah. Like the lesson from Joel just heard today, its purpose is to avert God's wrath. *"Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth...When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."* (Jonah 3:4-5,10)

Our Prayer Book instructs that there are two days to be *"observed by special acts of discipline and self-denial..."* (BCP, p. 17) These are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and by association most of the Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the rest of the year.

In truth, our modern, self-indulgent, consumer society considers fasting to be an old-fashioned, irrelevant piety. Why on earth would we want to deprive ourselves of good food or of anything else, for that matter? Overindulgence is another name for gluttony, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. It takes many forms and leads to all sorts of ills such as obesity, pollution and selfishness.

"Fasting from food, drink, or both, needs to be revisited as a positive expression of devotion and a means to pay closer attention to our relationship with God, with the world and with ourselves." This is a quote from "Six Smooth Stones: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life" written by Sr. Barbara Jean Brown, founder and present Abbess of the Episcopal Anamchara Fellowship. As a medical discipline, it can be a means of detoxification of the body, or a preparation for surgery. As a religious act, fasting can also be a means of detoxification from spiritual ills that have accumulated over time. There is a long history of fasting to prepare for worship. But it is very important to remember that religious fasting, especially during the forty days of Lent, is not a heavenly weight loss plan. It is not a diet nor is it a time to give up things we don't like to eat anyway.

Biblical accounts of fasting can be helpful when considering this discipline. There are a variety of reasons and ways that the people of God have observed the fast. In addition to the account from Jonah quoted above and today's lesson from Joel, here are a few other Biblical accounts of Fasting with their purposes:

“The Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David, and it became very ill. David therefore pleaded with God for the child; David fasted, and went in and lay all night on the ground.” (2 Samuel 12:15 – 25 – Appeal to God for healing);

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”* (Isaiah 58 – For physical & spiritual strength)

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.” (Matthew 4:2 – Preparation for temptations.)

So, what is the purpose of a religious or spiritual fast? According to Sr. Barbara Jean, the most important reason is probably that the body uses quite a bit of energy to digest food. As we fast, it gives our bodies something else to do, using that energy for other things. When we fast there can be a heightened sense of self-awareness. However, for many of us who are new to this discipline, it is common to think of nothing but food. Like every other spiritual discipline, it takes some getting use to.

I suggest that on the Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent and Holy Week, you give up just one meal. Say a prayerful devotion instead of eating. You might also set aside the money you saved from the meal and make a special offering to God. If you can not give up a meal for medical reasons, make a decision to fast from gossip or negative attitudes, or television, etc. There are many things in which we tend to overindulge. You may be surprised at the power Fasting can give to your spiritual life.