

Marion weekly update

MARCH 27, 2022

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON March 20- Disciplines: Fasting Matthew 6:16-18, Isaiah 58:3-7

This week we focus on a spiritual discipline that is very common during the season of lent. We focus on fasting.

Fasting is something we read about all throughout scripture. What we'll see is that there are different ways of doing it for somewhat different purposes.

Regarding purpose, fasting is often linked with prayer. There is an answer being sought from God, and even more than just an answer, but a desired outcome from the prayer. We want something to happen. Fasting accompanies the prayer in hopes that the answer will come sooner and we'll get the answer that we want. Another purpose is similar but different, to lend power to something. For example, when the disciples were having difficulty casting out a spirit, Jesus said that what they were trying to do only was possible through prayer and fasting. Apparently the disciples hadn't been fasting and so weren't up to the task.

Fasting is used to lend power to prayer as well as the to our faith practice. That said, we shouldn't be persuaded that fasting somehow "twists the arm" of God to force an outcome. Ultimately everything is in God's hands. David after his dalliance with Bathsheba and murdering her husband prayed and fasted for God to relent on the consequence of his behavior. That consequence was that the child conceived wouldn't survive. He fasted to the degree that his friends and attendants were fearful for his health. Nevertheless, the child perished.

If this is the purpose, what is the practice then?

Fasting is simply depriving ourselves of something for a period of time. Most often it is associated with food and sometimes drink. Going without eating for some determined set of days. But other things can be given up as well. Watching tv, some preferred activity, something offered sacrificially. What is significant is that whatever is offered has some genuine value to us. If it doesn't, there's no real meaning to the discipline, and we'll see why in a moment.

The question often asked is how on earth does depriving ourselves, or as some put it "making ourselves miserable" do anything for our connection with God?

The answer to this is actually front and center for many throughout the season of Lent. The tradition to fast on something is dear to many. The trick is to make sure it's done correctly so that it has the desired impact. Ultimately what fasting is intended to do is bring us closer to God. This where the power comes from. This is where more intentional and intense prayer comes from. This is where our focus to hear God's voice more clearly comes from. This is where the focus of our lives can become more in tune with God comes from.

What we fast on needs to have impact because it is in fighting and overcoming the temptation to indulge whatever it is that reminds us why we are fasting. Each time that urge hits, we think of God. When the urge hits hard we may even offer up a prayer for help in keeping the fast. This continual overcoming means that God is more present and center of our mind and heart. We get closer to God.

Fasting also incorporates other disciplines as well. For example if what is given up is time consuming, we fill that time with something that draws us nearer to God. For example if I choose to fast on lunch for a week or two, during the time I'd be eating perhaps I devote it to prayer or Bible study or intentional acts of service. Intentionally engaging these other disciplines through the fast deepens our relationship and connection with God.

If what I'm fasting on requires spending resources, sometimes people will set those resources aside and at the end of the fast donate them to some Godly cause.

All of this draws us nearer to God. As we do so our lives take on deeper meaning. Our relationship grows.

While all of this is good, there is a more significant fasting that God calls us to. We see it in our Isaiah passage today. All the fasting in the world does no good if we don't fast on this.

God is talking to Israel, which has fallen out of favor with God due to their unfaithfulness and wickedness. They seem to want credit and favor for their days of fasting, but God is having none of it. Instead, they are given instruction that pertains even today. Faith isn't about a list of rituals or disciplines to simply check off. Faith isn't solely about personal belief. It is about how all of that informs the very practical and real living that we do. It's about how we treat one another.

There is something really impressive about what God calls a “fast”. There are two edges to it. The one edge is what we shouldn’t do. We should do away with mistreating each other in any way shape or form. Anything that is unloving we should do away with. But then God also calls a fast something else. God indicates similarly what we noted with how we spend the time we’d invest in what we gave up. We replace something more Godly to do during that time. It’s not just what we give up, it’s what we then put in what we gave up’s place. It’s the proactivity. Doing away with injustice. Helping those in need. Actively replacing those things outside God’s will with things that are in God’s will.

Fasting isn’t just about what we don’t do. It’s also about what we do. It’s about right living before God.

God’s point here is that there is a larger picture involved. Far more than God wants us to do the rituals and disciplines, God wants us to love one another correctly. This is because of God’s goal with said disciplines. They are intended to draw us nearer to God with the intent of affecting how we live our lives. It’s not just about the individual. It’s about activating the individual to go into the world as an ambassador of Christ, to influence the world to do and be better before God.

This is all very James. “Faith without works is dead.” It’s also very Jesus. “This is how the world will know you belong to me. By how you love one another.” These are action statements. They are transformation statements. It’s not just about what I claim to believe inside. It’s about how that belief manifests itself in action and life. The point of faith is to make us new creatures. And to do this over and over again as we move on towards perfection. It’s more than right belief. It’s right action. If our actions aren’t aligned with God’s desire, then likely our belief is skewed in the wrong direction.

If our lives and actions aren’t impacting the world around us in a Godly way, all these disciplines are meaningless. God isn’t impressed. Because we’ve missed the entire point of them.

Our disciplines and such are intended to draw us nearer to God. Drawing nearer to God is intended to recreate us over and over to be more inclined and in tune with God’s will. We are called to be more and more like Christ. To replace hate with love, bitterness with grace, callousness with compassion, and so on. If that isn’t happening, then the disciplines aren’t doing us any good. They are worthless to us, and also then to God.

On the other hand, if we understand the difference between “big” and “little” fasting we infuse our faith and lives with power, and we gain God’s favor.

What is more significant to God? Cutting out hate in my heart or giving up cupcakes for a week? Naturally cutting out hate. Getting the “big” fast in perspective actually ramps up the “little” fast. When our lives are intentionally fasting as God calls us to in action, these other fasts intended to draw us nearer to God take on greater power and meaning. As they take on greater power and meaning, we come to fast even grander on the “bigger” things. They feed each other and all the while make us closer to God, to one another, and to realizing God’s Kingdom here on earth.

If you’ve heard the term “shalom” you likely have an association with it. Most people believe it simply means “peace”. It does. But it’s so much more than that. Shalom means having the world exist as God intended it from the outset. How did God intend it? Paradise. God intended it to be perfection with no pain or strife, sickness or death. Yet our world is a fallen one.

When we take fasting and the other disciplines seriously, we realize that our intention is to return the world to shalom. What are we doing to that effect?

If you want to fast, by all means fast. But do it with intention and purpose. Do it understanding where the power comes from. Fast with the expectation of transformation. In that transformation may your life be changed more into the shalom God desires. When that happens, be inspired to affect the community around you to create shalom there

BIBLE STUDY – Acts 15

This chapter of Acts is pivotal in several ways. There is a formal council convened to sort out theological issues, Paul’s mission to the Gentiles is cemented, and the famous relationship between Paul and Silas is formed.

We see that in the Gentile heavy church in Antioch, some folks from Jerusalem have arrived. They are stirring up trouble by trying to force the issue of circumcision as necessary for salvation. An interesting comment from our Wednesday morning group frames this up well. “If circumcision is necessary for salvation, where does that leave the women?” This is a great observation. How many things fly out of the mouths of Christians that even under cursory investigation fall apart immediately? We need to think before speaking.

For Paul, however, this is a significant moment. In requiring this Law bound act for salvation, these believers are also diminishing the people Paul is commissioned to reach. They aren’t good enough as Gentiles. They have to do something to become Jewish first. Paul is ministering to second class people.

Paul and Barnabas have an interesting reaction. They dispute these folks. They also head to Jerusalem for clarification. How do they deal with this assertion? What does the actual central authority of Christianity at the time, the Jerusalem church, have to say about the idea of forcing Gentiles to become a little Jewish in order to then become Christian.

As they travel and even as they arrive in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas are well received. They tell tales of how God has worked through them to bring the Gentiles to faith. They talk about signs and wonders. They uplift the church by sharing in all the good things that have transpired in their ministry.

When they arrive in Jerusalem, the question is asked and the discerning begins. They seek to genuinely address the question. The first speakers of note are the Pharisees. Not just Pharisees, but ones who are also believers. This is significant. So often when the term Pharisee is mentioned the assumption is that there is a problem. There is contention and a fight. Not so here. Even though they offer up a similar opinion that circumcision and the Law are necessary, it’s in a different context than the troublemakers. They are merely offering up fodder for discussion and discernment. We know this because we’re told that discussion went on for some time before Peter speaks up.

Why was circumcision such an issue here? Let's look at it through a lens of grace that honors that human nature was as present then as it is today.

First, it's a sign of covenant. This rite goes all the way back to Abraham. To be incorporated into Israel, this was a symbol that one had embraced the covenant between God and Abraham. That covenant made Israel God's chosen people. To say the symbol isn't relevant for the Gentiles sounds a lot like dismissing a long and rich history from which Christianity sprang. It risks diminishing the meaning of it, which is bringing one into proximity with God.

This symbol is a rich sign of Jewish history. If this sign isn't seen as central, what does this mean for regarding all of the background from which Christianity sprang?

This sign is a sign of the special status of the Jews. They are God's chosen people. This was the sign given to Abraham to set them apart. Now all of the sudden folks can be incorporated into God's people without it? Not unlike anyone who is built up to be special, to have someone entirely different also be known as special stings. Human nature is to enjoy status and being "a little bit better." Here, suddenly they aren't with all of the Gentiles being invited into faith before God.

Also, in historical significance, remember that Antioch is in Syria. 2 centuries prior, Syria had tried to ban circumcision as a practice. This was part of what led to the Maccabean revolt, that this sacred practice was trying to be outlawed. Perhaps there was some view that they were entering a "slippery slope". "If we let this slide for the Gentiles what next? Does this mean it means nothing? Is this one step closer to another ban?" While this may sound absurd, we need to remember that there are similar sentiments today about changing something we perceive as important. To the one who clings to it, it's not absurd, it is life altering.

The frustration is understandable.

As the debate goes on, Peter stands up and makes his argument. God has revealed the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant of grace. Peter was the one to whom this was revealed. Peter is the source of the first Gentile converts. Peter is the one who was friends with Christ and upon whom Jesus would build His church. Peter is the heavy hitting apostle leading the Pentecost charge and forging ahead courageously to begin forming Christ's church. We can't find a more significant figure than Peter. No one has a more solid character. His words carry enormous weight. Noteworthy is that Peter reminds them that not only have the Gentiles become equal partners in receiving the Holy Spirit, but that their salvation come through faith. Not as the result of a ritual, but heartfelt faith. Circumcision of the heart.

Paul and Barnabas follow sharing their stories of ministry. Then we hear from James.

James here is the leader of this council, not Peter as one might assume. In all this chatter, James is silent. He's listening. He's weighing. He's discerning. We know he is the one in authority as Luke records that James has the last word. He renders the "verdict". And interestingly no one objects. He says what he says and it's done. They need to go easy on the Gentiles and not bar their experience of faith. They should write a letter, but if not following the Law or circumcision, there are a few conditions.

At first glance this seems like a weird list. Don't eat food offered to idols. Don't eat meat that has blood in it or from an animal that dies by strangulation. And finally to abstain from sexual immorality. How on earth do these fit together?

They fit because all of them are aspects of pagan worship, which the Gentiles had come out of when they converted. These were practices associated with feasts and festivals honoring pagan gods. Even the sexual immorality. It's not what we might think in modern America. There were sexual rites and rituals associated with pagan worship practice. This is what is being referenced here, and why the command fits in with these other seemingly unrelated orders.

The assertion from James serves dual purpose.

It's common sense to discourage people from jumping back into lifestyles that are ungodly and might tempt them away from their new-found faith. In this sense it's protective of Gentile converts. Encourage them to remain steadfast with their brothers and sisters in Christ. At the same time pull them away from the lures that might draw them back to their past behavior and worship.

At the same time there is a genius to this. These expectations are rooted in the Law and the expectations of "resident aliens" among the Israelites. If non Jews wanted to incorporate into Israel, they had to follow some cultural norms. Don't bring your pagan ways into the community. Leave them at the door. To continue to engage them in the midst of Israel is disrespectful. So in ordering this, while James isn't insisting on circumcision, he is insisting that a basic courtesy be given to the Jews (the first Christians remember) by not playing fast and loose mixing old ways with new.

Paul and Barnabas are embraced by the Jerusalem church and sent back to Antioch with not only a letter, but with Judas and Silas, two men of renown in the church to act as confirmation for them. Notice this. Even though later there is some friction between Paul and the Jerusalem church, here they are in solidarity with one another. Paul honors a chain of command and the church endorses he and Barnabas' ministry.

But why send people with them back to Antioch?

Keep in mind that these troublemakers may have still been lurking about. If it were just Paul and Barnabas, who left in a bit of a snit, they might accuse them of lying about the verdict from James. After all, they had come from Jerusalem, and might try to pull rank that they know better the stance of the council. Having Judas and Silas makes certain that the message is delivered in a way that is powerful and affirmed.

In the letter, we find a couple things that are telling.

We see that it acknowledges that these men who came didn't come with the permission of the Jerusalem leadership. This tells us that the church is now organized. They have a central leadership that can be tapped when theological or other issues arise. They also have the ability to permit or deny people from ministry. Clearly here they didn't authorize the troublemakers to do what they did. The Jerusalem church distances themselves from the message and the messengers. The church has a structure and a leadership now.

Why was circumcision such an issue here? Let's look at it through a lens of grace that honors that human nature was as present then James also makes certain to clarify that it's the Holy Spirit and the council that find the recommendations to be correct. Even though in Luke's telling of the debate and discernment we don't read anywhere about prayer or consulting the Spirit, here it's explicit that the Holy Spirit was a central player in the discerning process. The message? Any discernment that has integrity has the Holy Spirit at its center.

Judas and Silas hang around for a bit, strengthening the Antioch church and then head back to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas remain in their old stomping grounds until Paul has an idea. Go back and visit the churches he and Barnabas started to see how they are doing.

This is very "Paul". He follow up. Remember, rather than take a direct line back to Antioch after their missionary journey, it was Paul who suggested they retrace their steps to visit the cities they'd been in to see how the believers were getting on.

Certainly we could say that Paul was prompted by the Holy Spirit. But we also can speculate a very human and sensible reason for heading back. They had just squelched some troublemakers in Antioch. What if the same kind of dustup was being started in these other churches? Perhaps they should go check.

The chapter winds down with the famous break between Paul and Barnabas, and Paul's beginning of the famous partnership with Silas.

We hear about Paul and Silas a lot. We need to keep in mind the powerful ministry with Barnabas. Barnabas vouched for Paul. He was Paul's brother as they began the powerful ministry of beginning and forming the Gentile arm of the church. This relationship was formative for Paul and for the church itself. The relationship is instructive for all of us as we've noted prior Barnabas being a strong figure of faith before Paul ever converted, and being glad to uplift Paul who becomes such a central figure in the history of our faith. They break over John Mark. We read about him earlier and all Luke noted was that in the midst of ministering with Paul and Barnabas he simply returned to Jerusalem. Apparently this leaving left a bad taste in Paul's mouth. We don't know why. Barnabas felt strongly enough about John Mark's character that he was willing to side with him over Paul's objection. And this decision caused Paul and Barnabas to break their relationship.

As odd as it sounds, this is encouraging. This is human. Even these great missionaries of the early church had human foibles and spats. So much so that they separated fellowship for a time. This happens all the time everywhere. People have disagreements that cause them to take a break. That Luke shows us their humanity is a gift that we may not be so far apart from these early church leaders.

At the same time we know that eventually Paul and Barnabas reconcile. Again, this is comforting and inspiring. Where so many may like to find a reason to hold a grudge because they don't see eye to eye, this isn't the way of Christ. Where so many, even in the church, look for reasons to divide, ultimately Paul and Barnabas find a way to unite. The way of Christ is the way of grace, mercy, compassion, and unity. It is being able to look past disagreement and stay connected over the one thing that ultimately matters, loving God and one another and inviting those around us into that life through a relationship with Christ.

In the moment, however, Barnabas goes his way with John Mark and Paul with Silas. The book of Acts is moving quickly towards being Paul centric in his missionary journeys. But there is another pattern evidenced here that is significant.

All through the book we've seen where efforts to squash the spread of the gospel have resulted in actually increasing its spread. Stephen is stoned and the believers scatter. And they take the gospel message with them wherever they end up. Paul is hunted and run out of town after town. Yet each town he ends up in he keeps preaching and spreading the gospel and starting churches. Every effort to stop the message ends up causing it to spread farther, wider, and faster. This is another example. Paul and Barnabas split. What happens? Now there are two missionary teams going out instead of one. What in other circumstances might threaten to squelch ministry actually expands it.

When things go a direction we don't desire what do we do with it? Do we see it as an ending failure or do we see the opportunity in whatever is before us? This makes all the difference in life and in ministry. Embracing the opportunity, even when it's hard to see past the hurt of a break or failure, always leads to more peaceful, productive, and faithful avenues.