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Introduction To Fasting

Today at sunrise we began our fast and we will continue until sunset. This morning I want to offer to you a brief introduction to fasting. I am going to look at the “why and how of fasting” as well as a “biblical perspective on fasting.” In our culture today with golden arches and pizza fasting might seem out of place. Many churches have long practiced fasts during Lent. Fasting is essential to our discipleship, holding the promise of connecting us more deeply to God and to that which God cares about deeply. Fasting is the expression of expectation and preparation.

First, why and how do we fast. Fasting is never simply about physical health because in scripture it is about many other things such as repentance, humility and holiness. Our fasting should always be centered on Christ.

Scott McNight says in his book “Fasting” that “Fasting is a person’s whole-body, natural response to life’s sacred moments”; “it is being with God and on God’s side in the midst of those moments.” McNight proposes that biblical and historically Christian patterns of fasting there is a sacred moment such as death, sin and fear that prompts the fasting then there is the act of fasting and finally we see the results of fasting such as life, forgiveness, new vision or hope. His is a responsive view of fasting; in other words; the fast is not initiated solely to obtain a desired result but instead springs from a “natural” response to serious happenings. ***Why do we fast? McNight is inviting us to rethink fasting: these practices are less about getting God to do things for us, and more about aligning ourselves fully with what God is doing in the world.***

Fasting gives us more time for prayer. You can use the time you’d normally spend eating as time in prayer for what God wants to do among us. As you fast today, we invite you to pray for the adjourned annual meeting. In the Bible, fasting is always connected with prayer. We read in Acts 13:2-3, “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

Fasting, in particular, is not a display to God of how serious we are in requesting something from God or doing something for God, but rather it is a natural response to grieving over what God grieves for. An example is the prophetic call to fasting in Isaiah 58: 6-, where fasting is a response to the presence of injustice and the condition of the

poor. When we fast in response to the grace issues of injustice, we suffer in solidarity with those who suffer - not that God desired the people to “share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house.” - and we enter more fully into God’s perspective on their suffering.

Fasting in the primary sense, is the abstention from all foods. The church year contains periods of feasting as well as fasting. This alternating pattern expresses our dual attention, as we live between Jesus’ time on earth and in expectation of the full realization of Christ’s kin-dom. We move back and forth between feasting in celebration of Christ’s birth, ministry, death and resurrection, and fasting in solemn hope for God’s kingdom to come “on earth as in heaven.”

However, for some of us today we might not be able to “fast from all foods” from different reasons - health and others. Lynne Baab points out in her book “Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites” that fasting from all food can be problematic for some and offers this definition: “Fasting involves removing something habitual to experience something new, such as taking a break from listening to music in the car so as to make a space for prayer.” This definition of fasting opens the practice to those that might feel excluded. So today, if you are able to fast from eating food from sunrise to sunset, great, but if you need to eat, look at removing something habitual as your fast to experience something new. Finally, remember, if we are presented with a situation where love requires us to break the fast, then we must do so. While fasting is a winding and varied journey, its destination is, across traditions, a greater love of God and neighbors.

Next, let's look at some of the biblical principles of fasting. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is taught in the Bible. Jesus asked his followers to fast. The Bible describes fasting as a natural way for God’s people as individuals or as a body to express humility, sorrow, repentance, seriousness in prayer and desire for God’s manifest presence. In several passages its excesses are curbed, and priority is rightly redirected toward issues of the heart and ethics instead of ritualized hypocrisy. The Bible mentions fasting from food in about 59 contexts.

We see fasting several times in the Bible:

Joel 1:14 - “Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.”

Joel 2:12 - “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

When there was opposition in the Bible we see prayer in fasting. In Ezra 8:23, “So we fasted and prayed about these concerns and God listened.”

What are the desires of our heart for Riverside Church AND what are God’s desires for Riverside Church as we prepare for the annual meeting? Let us go to God in prayer and fasting for these concerns as we see in scripture. Often in the Bible , God’s people fasted immediately before a major victory, miracle or answer to prayer. It prepared them for a blessing!

- Moses fasted before he received the Ten Commandments in Exodus.
- The Israelites fasted before a miraculous victory in 2 Chronicles.
- Daniel fasted in order to receive guidance from God. He says in Daniel 9:3, “So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with God in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.”
- Nehemiah fasted before beginning a major building project. (Nehemiah 1:4)
- Jesus fasted in Luke 4 during his victory over temptation.
- In Acts the first Christians fasted during decision making times.

As we see in these scriptures we observe the people of God fasting for a variety of reasons: they were facing a crisis, they were seeking God’s protection and deliverance, they had been called to repentance and renewal, they were asking God for guidance and they were humbling themselves in worship.

Some final thoughts to remember as you fast today:

- Fasting is not so much about food as it is about focus.
- Fasting is not so much about saying no to the body as it is about saying yes to the Holy Spirit.
- Fasting is not about doing without, it is about looking within.
- Fasting is an outward response to an inward attitude and cry of the soul.

Fasting is a call to return to God. Fasting is a means of seeking God. I would urge you to use this experience of fasting today to restore your focus and revive the power of prayer in your life. As we fast today, let us feast on the Lord looking to God for guidance, hope, forgiveness and strength.

Blessings on your fast!