

Sermon – January 28, 2024
“When we fast”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Prayer & Fasting

Text: Matthew 6:16-17 & Luke 5:33-39

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, help us open our hearts that we might be vessels for filling, and anoint the sharing of these words. Jesus, with these words, fuel our continuing transformation into your image and renew our desire to follow you into fruitful labor in your fields right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your words this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning and welcome to the fourth Sunday of Epiphany. Some may recall that a few weeks ago I pointed us to Jesus’ use of three “whenever” statements in Matthew, chapter 6: whenever we give alms, whenever we pray and whenever we fast. We have been looking at prayer but today we will begin to look at the discipline of fasting. We are rapidly approaching the season of Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday on February 14th. I don’t recall many Lenten traditions from my youth in my family, but I do remember one day in grade school talking with a young lady who lived just up the street and learning that she was not eating chocolate during Lent. Now, that seemed crazy to me. I liked chocolate even then, and when I asked why, she told me she had given it up for Lent as her fast. I think I asked my parents at supper what it meant to fast and told them what our neighbor had shared, and they explained that fasting is something the Catholics did. I am sure I was relieved as I did not want to go without chocolate. Over the years, I don’t recall a lot of emphasis on fasting in the churches I attended, but I did hear about it when talking with my Catholic friends and my Jewish friends who fasted.

As we move into the season of Lent, it seems timely to address fasting and learn where that discipline fits within Methodism and in the life of a follower of Christ. Let me point out that all major religions have some form of fasting. One of the most well-known is the Muslim fasting during Ramadan, when they fast each day of that season until the sun goes down, eat a large meal, and then begin their fast for the next day. John Wesley had a lot to say about fasting. In the 52 standard sermons that make up part of our Global Methodist Church discipline, sermon #27 is about fasting. It is a quick read and provides an excellent survey of fasting in the Bible. Wesley includes fasting as one of the means of grace, a physical action through which we can experience God's grace, similar to prayer or reading scripture. Let me share John Wesley's definition of fasting: "As to the nature of it, all the inspired writers, both in the Old Testament and the New, take the word to fast in one single sense, i.e. not to eat, to abstain from food. This is so clear, that it would be labour lost to quote the words of David, Nehemiah, Isaiah, and the prophets which followed, or of our Lord and his apostles; all agreeing in this, that to fast, is, not to eat for a time prescribed." Wesley's sermon is a good resource for learning about fasting and so I recommend we read his sermon. As Wesley points out, there is a large biblical case for fasting. The first occurrence of the idea of fasting is found in Leviticus when the Law concerning the Day of Atonement is given and we find the people are to "deny themselves" until evening. That phrase is typically translated as fast, but we see that the idea is not to eat from the evening of the preceding day until the end of the fast, typically at sundown or at the time of afternoon prayer, 3–4 o'clock in the afternoon. Fasting, as Wesley points out, is to abstain from food for a time. There are many reasons to fast and there are benefits as well as hazards to abstaining from food. One of the most important reasons to fast is that Jesus implied his followers would fast. In the Matthew passage, Jesus tells us *whenever* we fast and not *if* we fast.

Let me share some of my own experience with fasting. I will say upfront that, currently, fasting is my least favorite means of grace. If I am honest, I have to say that I don't have in depth experience with fasting. Now, I have already shared my first encounter with fasting when I learned it was a Catholic thing and not something we Protestants did. I remember that for many years we had fish on Fridays in the school cafeteria and I learned that fasting was for the Catholics who fasted from meat on Fridays. I have rarely heard fasting mentioned in sermons over the years, but some pastors have talked about fasting. When I began reading the scriptures, I began to find fasting as part of the ceremonies and part of Jesus' life. I think my nudge into

fasting came from a Catholic friend who asked me if we Protestants fasted, and I said yes, we do and that I needed to fast for Lent. My earliest attempts at fasting were to abstain from desserts during Lent. And I will confess that I was really excited to learn from one of my Catholic friends that Lent is only forty days, so I got to feast on the Sundays in Lent and have dessert. One year I decided that I drank too much caffeine, so I tried giving caffeine up for Lent, but after three days with a headache, I decided that was a bad idea and switched back to desserts. Even with these simple abstinences, I struggle with legalism when I fast. I struggle to decide what counts as a dessert or sweet and what does not. I once thought about giving up sugar for Lent until I realized that I would have little to eat as there is sugar in so many of our food products. At some point in my journey into fasting, I learned that John Wesley's approach to fasting was that on at least a weekly basis, and maybe twice a week, he would stop eating after supper and then abstain from food until about 4 pm the next day. He would break the fast with a light snack and then begin eating normally again with the evening meal that day. I thought, "I could do that" and began to try the Wesley approach to fasting and tried taking time to pray more instead of eating. I did discover that I can sometimes fast in that manner. Let me point out that our bodies are very complex jars of clay and when we fast, they do respond. We will experience hunger when we don't eat, and our bodies will respond. Some will experience a drop in blood sugar levels and if you fall into that category, then you most likely should not try fasting. I don't have that issue and in fact will forget to eat if I am focused deeply on other things. Keep in mind that if you have physical issues that fasting would complicate, then your means of grace focus should be elsewhere. Over time, as I have tried to fast, my body has figured out what is coming and begins to control the reserves in case I never eat again. For me, that means I get cold and even after I end my fast, it takes a while for my body to believe it will ever have food again and to release energy to keep me warm. That response can be good during the summer, but difficult in the winter. I am not sure where my body is using the energy reserves it has, but it is not to keep me warm. The point is each of us will be impacted in a different physical manner as we are all unique people. Now don't get the idea that I am bragging, because I do struggle with fasting. I do not always succeed in not eating. Sometimes I forget I am fasting. Sometimes I forget what day I picked out for a fast, and sometimes life gets in the way, and typically I can find a really good reason not to fast.

I also struggle to find or experience God's grace in the midst of fasting. Fasting is not only a physical discipline but a spiritual discipline. Our hunger is a means to connect us deeper to God, to help us encounter God more completely, and to allow us to move food out of the way and focus on God filling us. The spiritual aspects of fasting are a mystery. Fasting is coupled with prayer and with Holy Spirit working in us. I struggle some with the hunger and physical aspect fasting brings, but I struggle a lot with finding spiritual blessings through fasting. During part of my fasting journey, I was blessed when Seedbed did something called the 40-day journey to fasting. You could join a group of people who were also trying to fast and be encouraged to fast, receiving a weekly email on your fast day that talked about entry into your time of fasting, gave scriptures to focus on during the day, and had a time of prayer together with other people. The forty days were spread over fifty-two weeks so you could opt out several weeks or, if you did not make the fast all day, you had twelve weeks to try again. I was greatly blessed by the reading of scripture and teaching on fasting, but I struggled and still struggle to find the spiritual connection to God in my fasting. I did learn in my experience that I am not unique; others struggle with fasting on all levels as well. There was and is something missing from my fasting approach. Let me summarize my fasting experience as I struggle with fasting but also seek to be obedient to Jesus' words of "whenever we fast." We as those seeking to follow Jesus look to his life for examples of what our lives should look like. If we look in our Bibles, we will find many references to Jesus fasting. The first example is immediately after he is baptized by John and Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness for a time of testing, a time described as a time when he ate nothing. Jesus fasted for forty days, a very long fast and the number of days we set aside for the season of Lent. Now, I am not asking us to stop eating for forty days unless Holy Spirit is leading us there. There is another example of Jesus fasting that I would like to encourage us with this morning. Let me take us to a well where a tired Jesus sits waiting. We probably all know this well. It is Jacob's well outside of a town in Samaria called Sychar. The scripture is found in John 4:1-42. We have been to this well before as we looked at this moment when Jesus talks with a foreign woman, shares who he is, the Messiah, the woman comes to faith, and in response, she brings the whole town out to meet him so that they may believe in Jesus. I have read this passage many times and have read several commentators' notes and thoughts on this passage from John. While they are helpful on many points about what Jesus shared with the woman and the impact the good news has on her and the town, there have always been a couple of aspects of

the well story that stand out that no one explained. The first is in verse 4 where John writes that Jesus had to go through Samaria. The question that is left open is why did Jesus have to go through Samaria? There is a route around Samaria that most Jews took, so Jesus did not have to go through Samaria. What does John mean when he states that Jesus had to go through Samaria? Is John recalling how hard the disciples worked to go a different way to avoid going through and Jesus had insisted they go through? A similar passage is where Jesus is sitting by the well, tired out from the journey, and his disciples have gone into the city to get food. While they are gone, Jesus talks with the woman. Jesus has insight into her life that is revealed to him through the Spirit and shares with the woman. She comes to faith in Jesus and her life is changed. Now, that aspect of the well story is something we are familiar with, and commentators comment on it in detail. But, just as the woman leaves to go to get everyone in the city, Jesus' disciples return and urge Jesus to eat something.ⁱ Jesus doesn't take the food they offer and instead tells them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."ⁱⁱ The disciples wonder if someone has given him something to eat. No one has been there. Jesus hasn't even had a drink of water from the well. And I think the disciples and I wonder, "What food is Jesus talking about? What is going on here?" These are questions that I have long had about this passage for which I have not found answers, and they have for me long been open questions in search of answers. Over the last few weeks, JD Walt, writing in the Seedbed Wake-Up Call, has been asking these same questions and proposing answers that pertain to our learning to fast and he is beginning to address what is happening in these passages. And I am beginning to agree with him as his answers are starting to fill in gaps that answer my own questions. If we make the connection that Jesus does not take the food the disciples bring with them when they return from lunch in Sychar, we begin to realize that Jesus is fasting. As Jesus is fasting, he is abiding in the Father and what the Father is doing, Jesus is seeking to do what he sees the Father doing. Jesus has to go through Samaria because the Father is at work there in the life of a woman with no husband. Jesus, physically hungry, is at the well and shares who he is with a Samaritan woman who shares with the town, and people come, hear for themselves, and come to know that Jesus is the Savior of the world. Jesus is at work in the will of the Father, doing what the Father is doing. Jesus has food to eat that the disciples do not know about. Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that the food they know nothing about is to do the will of Him who sent me and to complete His work. Think about this food Jesus speaks to for a moment. Jesus is fasting. He is being guided by a heightened awareness of what the Father is

doing through the fast and is completing the work of the Father, seen in going to the town, sitting at the well, being a witness to the woman, helping her receive faith and then share it with all in the town. What is this food that Jesus has that his disciples do not know anything about? What does it mean to have food that is the will of the one who sends us and whose work we are to complete? Is there anyone besides me who would like to have some of the food Jesus speaks to here? What Jesus is experiencing as he fasts is not what I experience when I have tried to fast, but I want this food. I want to understand what Jesus is talking about and I want to experience this new food he speaks to that we know nothing about. Jesus' experience is beginning to challenge my giving up chocolate for a Lenten fast and replacing it with a new desire to experience the food Jesus finds when he fasts. So, how do I get from setting aside one of my favorite foods for a while as a fast to feasting on the will of the one who sent me and completing his work? How do I enter into fasting that is satisfied with the food that I know nothing about? How do I get my fasting attempts to become fasting that leads me to feast on such food? Anyone else ready for this kind of fast? What would it look like to be part of a fellowship whose members are all feasting on the food Jesus speaks to at the well in Samaria? What would our journey through Lent, and a season of fasting, be like if our food became doing the will of the one who sent us and completing his work?

Now this is the point in our Good News Club when the mission story is being shared and the speaker says, "Well, if you want to know the answers to these questions, you will have to come back next week." And we whine and look forward to the rest of the story the next week. But the honest answer is that I don't know how to find this food that Jesus speaks of at the well. I have not experienced this food when I fast. I can't be our guide to this food. We have to turn together to the one who can lead us into all truth and ask Holy Spirit to guide us to receive the food Jesus has for us when we fast. We have to trust Holy Spirit to guide us to experience the food Jesus has and to use us to do the will of Jesus and work through us to complete his works. Our fasting has to become something that leads us to this food. Our fasting has to become a means of grace, where we receive grace and share it with others. Our fasting does involve hunger but a hunger that is a burden that Jesus would have us carry, a burden that is light, a burden that is an easy yoke to carry. So, our fasting needs to bring hunger that we can bear, that we can carry. Our fasting has to become a time when we are able to be about the will of the one who sent us and empowers us to complete his work. Our fasting has to be an abiding in Jesus. As we

go forward this week, let me encourage us to begin to ask Jesus what this food might look like in our lives. Ask Holy Spirit to guide us into a fast that would allow us to receive the food Jesus received at the well, to receive the food Jesus is waiting to give us when we fast. Ask Holy Spirit to guide us to a fast that would allow us to abide more fully with Jesus and to produce fruit. Ask Jesus to guide us to the food he receives from the Father. Ask Jesus to prepare us to fast in a new way that gives us food that is his will and completes his work. Ask Jesus to teach us to fast and to feast on the food that we know nothing about. Ask Jesus to lead us out of our struggles to deny ourselves food and into a feast on his will and being used by him to complete his works.

Pray with me: Jesus, we long for the food that we do not know about. Jesus, guide our hearts, minds, and bodies that we might learn to fast in a manner that brings us the food you receive from the Father. Jesus, lead us to food that is your will and guides us to be open to your invitation to complete your work. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ NRSV John 4:31.

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