

Not Another Starvation Diet

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

We've got the Atkins diet. The South Beach Diet. There's even a Caveman Diet.

According to a survey done by Consumer Reports in 2007, approximately 41% of Americans claim they are currently on a diet. WebMD, a popular health-related website, lists 89 different diet plans you can follow. And that's without even looking at all the different weight-loss pills, supplements, or surgeries that are also widely available.

With all those options, and all those people on a diet, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that at any given moment, 1/3 of American adults are choosing to be hungry. I'm not talking about people who are hungry because they can't afford good, nutritious food. I'm talking about those of us who intentionally refrain from eating, hoping it will result in significant weight loss.

That number seems staggering to me. Admittedly, this is really fuzzy math. But even if it's 10 or 15%, I'm amazed. I'm not really surprised that so many people are on a diet – after all, one of the things our culture values most is beauty, often represented by being thin. I'm not really even surprised by how many diets out there still are just one more version of a starvation diet. As Americans, we love the concept of the crash diet. It gives us the instant gratification we're looking for. So what is it that surprises me? I am flabbergasted by the huge number of

Americans who willingly choose to go hungry, while almost all of us cringe at the idea of fasting.

And before you think I'm talking at you about this, I put myself squarely in that category. Fasting? Really? Can't I skip that discipline for my sermon series? I'd rather take on 10 spiritual disciplines at once than fast for just one week. But my very avoidance makes me think that perhaps we should take another look at fasting. And why we're so averse to the idea.

First, we should be sure we're all starting with the same definition when it comes to fasting. My favorite definition comes from John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist movement. Wesley thought fasting was absolutely crucial for Christian living. In a sermon, he once said, "It would be a waste of time to quote the words of David, Nehemiah, Isaiah, and the Prophets, or of our Lord and his Apostles; all agreeing in this, that to fast, is, not to eat for a prescribed time." Wesley was a quirky guy in many respects, but one thing I love about him is how absolutely practical he is. Fasting is nothing fancy, and we don't need to spend hours quibbling about what is or isn't fasting. Fasting, quite simply, is not eating. Period.

It's funny that Wesley gives such a short definition for fasting, when he then goes on to give at least seven reasons for fasting. Some of which are obscure, and which he doesn't seem to support. For instance, he mentions that some people fast in order to punish themselves, and other fast simply because they are so distraught they simply forget to eat. The most important reason to fast, he said, was to improve our prayer life.

If you have ever fasted, either for spiritual or medical purposes, you are familiar with the physical reaction your body has. But how many of us are aware of the spiritual reactions we may have while fasting? Richard Foster, in his classic book *The Celebration of Discipline*, says this about fasting:

In the beginning, you will be fascinated with the physical aspects of your experience, but the most important thing to monitor is the inner attitude of your heart. Outwardly you will be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration, song, and worship.

Fasting is like a great secret between you and God. Everyone around you may think you're filing paperwork, or reading email, or changing diapers, but really you're sharing every moment of your day with God. In a way, it's kind of like your own, private Take Your God to Work Day. And there's something kind of exciting about such a holy secret. Every time your stomach growls, you are reminded that God is not just watching you, but God's very Spirit rests within you, working with and through you even in your most mundane tasks.

In Matthew, Jesus tells the crowd not to look dismal, or gloomy, or sad when they are fasting. In all honesty, we shouldn't look miserable, because we shouldn't be miserable. We may be fasting from food, but we are feasting on God! You should have been here a few weekends ago when our youth participated in the 30-Hour Famine. They agreed to fast for 24 hours in order to help them identify with those who face hunger around the world. The only time anyone looked unhappy was when we had a game of tag that was unwinnable. After we changed the rules, everyone was back to laughing and having a good time. And if you've caught that spirit, that joy of sharing constant communion with God, you may tune out of the sermon now. Instead, you may turn directly to the homework insert in your bulletin.

But something tells me that even if we're thinking that fasting might have some positive aspects, we might still be harboring some hesitation. I've heard some pretty good excuses for avoiding fasting. Some people suggest that we don't need to fast from food, because what God really wants is for us to fast from more significant things. Things like anger or vanity. Wesley agrees that it is good to fast from sin. But he was a very practical guy, and he would get right in

your face and ask you, how are you going to do that? Fasting from food is one method we can use to help us in our ultimate goal to fast from sin.

Another excuse people give is that it doesn't seem to work for them. They have tried fasting, but they didn't feel close to God. Blessings didn't shower down upon them. Their prayers weren't answered. Why bother with the discomfort of being hungry if there's no upside?!? Here I must disagree with Wesley. His answer was, "well, you must be doing it wrong. Do it right and you will feel close to God." Sorry John, that's not terribly helpful.

As we continue these next six weeks to talk about different spiritual disciplines, we would do well to remember a few things. First, they are called disciplines for a reason. They are not easy. They require us to dig deep to find the strength and resolve to see them through. Second, they are not a one-time thing. Sometimes they are called spiritual practices. You can't sit down at the piano once and expect to master the instrument. You have to practice every day. You have to practice for years. Fasting is the same. You can't just do it once and base all your opinions on that experience.

Spiritual disciplines are cumulative. The more of them we practice, the more often we practice them, the longer we practice them, the more we feel their impact. Because the real purpose of spiritual disciplines is that we might be transformed. God is amazing and powerful, but we are also stubborn and sinful. We usually need to have lots of contact with God before God can truly transform our lives.

So are you ready to be transformed? Are you willing to give fasting a try? No one go hiding the donut holes, because I'm not about to suggest that you stop eating until next Sunday. As with just about anything difficult in life, we have to warm up. We have to learn to walk

before we can run. And there are simple, short fasts that we can try to give us a glimpse into this experience.

One of the oldest Christian writings we still have a copy of today is a short document called the Didache, or The Teaching. This is not so much a Scripture as it is a handbook for new Christians. It calls for believers to fast twice a week. John Wesley was so certain of the power of fasting that he called all Methodists to return to the Didache and fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. He couldn't really enforce it with common people, but he would not ordain any pastors unless they practiced these fasts.

These Methodist fasts generally started after dinner the night before the fast-day. The fast would continue until mid-afternoon the following day, whenever you got home from being in public. So if you choose to fast on Wednesday, go ahead and eat dinner on Tuesday night. But nothing to eat after that until you get home from work on Wednesday. Wesley suggested 3:00 in the afternoon was a good time to end.

Why not just go until dinner? It's generally best to end your fast in the same attitude of prayer that you have during the fast. Breaking your fast during a silent moment of reflection on your experience, while eating a simple piece of fruit, can be a very moving time. Also, from a physical standpoint, this can be easier on your body than breaking your fast with a big plate of spaghetti. This is especially true with longer fasts.

In our Scripture reading this morning, Jesus fasts for 40 days. But by far, the most common length for fasting in the Bible is just one day. Are you tough enough, brave enough, disciplined enough to give it a try? I dare you to pick one day this week that works for you and experience a Methodist fast. I double dare you to continue through Lent by fasting for one day each week until Easter. Amen and amen.