

Fasting: Acts 13:1-3, Acts 14:21-28, Matthew 6: 16-18

First a story about fasting. I lived in Poland for 2 years in the early 2000s. When I lived there, I often ate at McDonalds. It was cheap and familiar though some of the food was different. For instance, pork burgers were a thing. Poland is one of the most Catholic countries in the world. Roman Catholics have strong teaching and history with regards to fast and feast days. I was at McDonalds one Friday and I noticed that I was the only person in the whole restaurant eating a hamburger. It was literally a sea of filet o' fish. I have never seen so many people eating filet o' fish. I actually don't know if I had ever seen anyone eating a filet o' fish and now here was an entire restaurant with filet o' fishes! Then I realized, oh, right, it is Friday and Friday is a fast day. Even in my public high school, the cafeteria always served fish and chips (otherwise known as fish sticks and fries) on Fridays. But why? What is the point? What is the significance and importance of fasting? What does the Scripture tell us today?

Our readers theatre this morning recounted the stories from Acts about Paul and Barnabas. Before Saul/Paul and Barnabas are sent off to minister to the fledgling churches, they fasted and prayed. The scripture tells us, "as they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Appoint Barnabas and Saul to the work I have called them to undertake' " (Acts 13:2). We see fasting here as part of a normal spiritual practice. It is lumped together with praying. Luke, the writer of Acts, doesn't elaborate. Fasting is presented in concert with praying and worshipping as normal activities in the church. But it is interesting to note that the Holy Spirit shows up right after the fasting which I think encourages us to think about the significance of fasting. I don't think that fasting has been a regular part of Mennonite tradition but yet we do spend an enormous amount of time and spiritual energy on prayer and worship, so why not fasting? What can fasting offer our spiritual life that is different to our experience with prayer or worship?

Later in Acts, Paul and Barnabas appoint elders for each church. The Scripture tells us that, "With prayer and fasting, they committed these elders to the Lord, in whom they had placed their trust." (Acts 14: 23) Again, fasting is presented as a normal companion to prayer. But again, I want us to notice the other words in the text. Earlier we saw how fasting was

immediately followed by a visit by the Holy Spirit and here fasting is immediately followed by commitment. I want to suggest that therein lies the significance of fasting.

Fasting makes room for the Holy Spirit and it shows commitment in a different way to prayer. Our theme today is making room. Making room for God, using fasting as way to seek God, listen for how the Holy Spirit may be guiding us and then committing to act on that guidance. So the fasting in a means to an end, not the end in and of itself. We should fast not for the sake of fasting but for what the fasting will teach us, how it will bring us closer to God. I imagine that is one of the reasons that fasting has not taken off in the Mennonite tradition as the ancestors of our faith turned away from the showier aspects of the Christian faith that had taken over. Fasting went the way of icons, stained glass and instruments in worship. Maybe we can re-discover the joy and meaning in fasting as we have re-discovered the joy of instruments in worship.

Sister Joan Chittister, Catholic nun and thoughtful documenter of faith writes, “when a practice strays far from its original intentions, it often must disappear so that it can be re-discovered for the right reasons.”<sup>1</sup> She goes on to say that for her generation fasting was more a burden than a blessing. It was “more an attempt to punish the body than an invitation to strengthen the soul.” So if fasting helps us seek God, strengthens our soul, makes room for guidance from the Holy Spirit and can be used along with prayer and worship as an important spiritual practice then maybe we should give it a try. But how? When?

Jesus has something to say on the matter. He discusses in the Sermon on the Mount, a text which I have found is near and dear to many a Mennonite heart. Here is what Jesus has to say:

<sup>16</sup> “And when you fast, don’t put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. <sup>17</sup> When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. <sup>18</sup> Then you won’t look like you are fasting to people, but

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<sup>1</sup> Chittister, Joan. “Not so Fast.” *U.S. Catholic* 72, no. 2 (February 2007): 28–32. <https://search-ebcsohost-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,uid&db=rh&AN=CPLI0000443434&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matt 6: 16-18)

I love this translation so much. Fasting should not make you miserable and it should not make you miserable to be around. Don't mope around, displaying your penance and how pious you are. That is not the point. Brush your hair, wash your face, get yourself together. Again the fasting is not the point, it is what the fasting can bring. If you are pushing people away and making a scene with how religious you are, your fasting will be pointless. Fasting is between you and God. Fasting is a way for you personally to seek God in secret. So if you are getting the Filet o' fish because everyone else is, you have missed the point. If the Filet o' fish is not bringing you closer to God and making room for the Holy Spirit, you have missed the point. Jesus is reminding his followers that fasting is to be a blessing not a burden. Fasting should bring you closer to God and not alienate you from your neighbours.

I wonder if fasting can not only bring us closer to God but also bring us closer to our neighbours. How does fasting make room for neighbours. I return us to our McDonald's scene. There might be something comforting in seeing familiarity and solidarity as you look out and see all the other patrons eating the filet o' fish. I'm sure many of you are familiar with Doris Janzen Longacre's important little book, *The More With Less Cookbook*. There have been many iterations of this kind of book in the Mennonite world. *Living More with Less*, *More with Less* 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, my favourite *Simply in Season*. Many of these books include stories about eating less (fasting) as a means of creation care but also as way to live in solidarity with those around the world less fortunate to ourselves.

I remember reading several stories in the *Living More with Less* book about individuals and families who fasted from supper one night a week, or attempted to dine on the meager rations given through food aid, or only had tea for lunch. I remember thinking at the time, that is seemed silly and performative. Like what were those actions by middle-class North Americans really going to achieve. In light of this idea of making room, I wonder if these actions make room in our imaginations for really contemplating what life is like for other people around the world. I am making room for understanding and appreciating someone else's

experience. We are making room for the Holy Spirit to change our hearts and minds. We are making room to hear how God may be speaking to us. Since Mennonite identity tends toward the communal, we live our faith communally; maybe we can re-cast the more with less movement as a kind of fasting. Part of the point of more-with-less was to live in solidarity with others and to start to understand their suffering.

I think that is the key to understanding fasting, especially as Jesus describes it. It is not performative. Don't walk around with a sad face, moaning and wallowing in your pious despair. Fasting should prepare us, like Paul, Barnabas and the elders of the early church. Prepare us to listen for the Holy Spirit, prepare us to serve the church, deepen our prayer life but above all to make room for listening for God. Fasting should not alienate us from our neighbours or push them away from us, fasting should help us understanding the suffering of our neighbours. Sister Joan says, "when we fast, we become voluntarily poor and so understand the needs of the poor."

She also says that, "fasting confronts our consumer mentality with a reminder of what it means to be dependent on God." We can easily forget in our fairly wealthy and comfortable life here in Waterloo Region that we are indeed all dependent on God. If I don't have something I need or want I go to the store and buy it or maybe I make it from something I have bought. I know some of us, pride ourselves on our skills in the garden, or kitchen or quilt room or wood shop. We like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient but truly we are not. We are all, all of us, dependent on God. Fasting can remind us of that fact. Fasting, prayer, worship, almsgiving, Bible-reading—all these spiritual practices should bring us closer to God. These practices should make room for God and make room for others in all of creation's relationship with our Creator. Fasting should not be overly burdensome and it should not be detrimental to our health, it should strengthen us in our relationship with God and with each other. Fasting should prepare us for hearing the Holy Spirit, hearing the word of God but also fasting should help listen and hear our neighbours. So let's brush our hair, wash our faces and get on with the business of making room.