



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

The fast that God chooses The First Day of Lent 2172021

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Over the past week, I've been thinking a lot about two friends of mine and the fasting that they did that I observed. The first was a guy that I met when I was part of a fellowship that went to France and then later on to Morocco. He was an investment banker from Brooklyn and he was this remarkable dynamic individual when I first met him. When I saw him again at dinner, after a couple of years, he had found this kind of place of deep silence within him.

We sat next to each other and I asked him what was going on. And he told me that he had experienced some incredible challenges in his life, particularly with the company that he was trying to start. And to somehow deal with the stress of starting that company and all that was riding on it, all that was challenging him, he began to too fast for a year. And he did that by drawing upon the deepest resources in his own Black church tradition of fasting and praying and hoping and waiting and putting everything into God's hands.

I remember his face and how different it was from the face that I had met when I first met him. I remember the way in which he had somehow yielded so much control in his life to something which was clearly larger than he could control. As soon as I saw him and heard the explanation of his fasting, I found myself praying for him. I saw in my mind's eye, the family that I had met, his children, all of those things, which were hanging in the balance so long as he could bring home the bread.

The second person that I observed fasting was a friend of mine who was Muslim. He was the only Muslim representative on this university board. And he was in the face of a board in which there were a lot of things that needed to be discussed. It was done by people who had huge standing in the community and he was a litigator. It was during Ramadan that we had a special retreat and he came and he chose not to eat and drink. I remember what tipped me off wasn't the fact that he didn't eat breakfast, but it was the fact that he chose not to drink water.

I went up to him at the break and I said, "Feisal, you're fasting." And he said, "Yes, I know that it's something I shouldn't be doing. I have diabetes. My doctor

has told me not to do it. My e-mom (sp?) has told me not to do it, but when I fast, I find a way of being reminded that I am human. And that reminder of my humanity helps me negotiate days like today and every day.”

What does it mean to fast? For my first friend, Richard, it was a moment in which he climbed into his deepest resources to meet a challenge that he was facing in his life, a major life challenge. It was a way of centering himself on God and placing everything that he was hoping to do in God's hands. And for my friend, Feisal, when he says he wants to be human he's of course speaking aspirationally that he wants to somehow attain a level of humanity that he has been destined for by God, a level of humanity that is full of the love of God, full of the justice of God, full of everything that God is.

And traditionally, when we think about the theology of fasting within the Christian tradition, it often happens at pivotal moments in a person's life. When Jesus is driven by the spirit, into the wilderness, He fasts for 40 days and 40 nights, and literally is emptied of himself so that he might be filled with God. And Saul in the Book of Acts, after he was knocked off his horse, fasted for three days, having no food or drink until he could come to terms with the person he was, with the mirror that God was lifting up before him and showing him.

Fasting has always been a way in which by denying some part of ourselves, we create space within our souls for the desires of God to grow. And our acknowledgement of God at the center of our lives is made clear. But I want to suggest something to you tonight that there's a kind of fasting in the scriptures that we have before us today which does not think about fasting so much in terms of denying yourself a desire, but rather living into a deeper relationship.

And we see that today in our reading from Isaiah. The setting of this text is that the people of God are wondering where God is in the midst of their exile. Why isn't God intervening in their lives and rescuing them? And so they're wondering what's wrong with their fasting. They blame their observances. The answer that Isaiah gives them from the Lord is that their fasting has been entirely an act of self-fashioning and self creation. They've fasted in a way that nothing will change in their lives, except for the observance of their religion. And fasting, Isaiah says, is not simply cosmetic. Fasting is meant to be an invitation to conversion and justice and love. And in all these things there is relationship.

And so, Isaiah gives to them a word from the Lord, is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the throngs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Fasting, Isaiah is telling us, is not to be understood entirely as self-denial, but more importantly at the basis of every fasting is the determination to live into

relationship. Because at the end of all of these things, when we act for justice, when we free the oppressed, when we feed the hungry, when we clothe the naked, when we welcome our kin, whether they need a welcome or not, or whether they deserve a welcome or not, we are engaging and acknowledging the relationships that we have around us, the connection between us that we might try to differentiate ourselves or to distance ourselves or to elevate ourselves from others.

So fasting for Isaiah is to be in relationship with the poor, with the outsiders, for those who have not been welcomed, for those who are marginalized, for those who have a hard time finding their way into whatever circle we're in. And fasting is a moment in which we step into that relationship and give a piece of ourselves so that we might gain a humanity that lives in relationship with God.

An echo of this is found in our reading today from the Gospel of Matthew. When Jesus tells His disciples to not pray by mounting up many words, to not look terrible when they're trying to fast and when you're holding yourself back, to anoint themselves with oil and go about their daily business, so that the father who sees in secret may reward them. Jesus is simply asking them to step away from that act of self-fashioning and to begin to live into the relationships that fasting is meant to cultivate.

So my question to you today is what relationships in your life need some attention and work? What relationships need a bit of repair and mending. What kind of union can you bring where there has been estrangement? Because Lent and the fasting that happens in Lent is not just about giving up chocolate or not just about giving up sweets, as much as that might help you. It's fine but Lent is about so much more.

And Lent is not so much about finding some kind of project of self creation in which you somehow attain a new spiritual high. But rather Lent is about living into the relationships that surround you always, and yet are hidden in plain sight. So this Lent, ask yourself what needs to be repaired. What in the relationships around me need some attention? Whether that's a relationship with your spouse or partner or friend or family or work or community or church, or whether it is something even more indefinable or something that sits at the margin of those intersections and somehow is key to you understanding who you are.

Now is the time, we read in our reading from 2 Corinthians. Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation. Lent is an invitation to make this season the time in which you mend, the time in which you find these relationships out and bring them back together; the time in which you begin to repair; the time in which you begin to reconcile; the time in which you begin to forgive; the time in which you learn what it means to be truly human and to be remade into the love of Christ so that it comes through you and remains distinctively you and yet is fully Christ as well.

May this Lent be a time of decision for you. May this Lent be a time of repair for you. May this Lent be a time of reconciliation for you. May this Lent be a time of forgiveness for you. May this Lent be a time in which you realize that you are surrounded always by the love of God and Christ Jesus who will bear you through all things, because his love bears all things, endures all things, hopes all things, because God loves you and bids you to follow Him. For in Him are the riches that give life everlasting.

Amen.

[End of Recording]