

Fasting

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Preaching on:
Mark 1:9-15

When the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness after his baptism, the Bible tells us that he fasted for forty days. Which is pretty impressive. Not bad, Jesus. But if you'll allow a little flex here: today is my 49th day of fasting. I started on January 1. Please, don't worry: unlike Jesus in the wilderness, I'm not eating nothing at all. On my fast, I eat every day. I just eat less. There's an old tradition of Lenten fasting where you eat one vegan meal a day for Lent. Being a family man in an omnivorous household, I knew that going vegan would just be too much for everybody right now, so I decided to just try eating one meal a day.

Now, just to be clear right up front: I'm not being bananas about this, and I haven't been able to eat just one meal a day for 49 days straight. I think I started with like three days of eating just one meal and decided to take it from there, paying close attention to my body and my health and the needs of the day. After three weeks, I worked myself up to a basic pattern of eating one meal a day for five days, and then eating regularly for two days. But, for example, this week I got a little cold, and I wanted plenty of energy for immune defense, so I added in an extra day of normal eating just to make sure I had all the food my body needed to be healthy. I want to be clear that I'm not being fanatical about this, which could be very unhealthy.

Why am I doing it? Well, fasting is an important and traditional part of our religion, and I have almost no experience with it. I thought I should try it out and report back to you what I learned in Lent, which is the most traditional time for fasting and giving things up in Christian life.

So, what have I learned? Lesson 1 is theological: Body and Spirit are United

One of the first things I decided on this journey is that I wasn't going to mess with any bad theologies about the human body. I was not going to fast to punish myself. I was not going to fast in a way that harmed my physical health or well-being. Causing yourself physical harm does not provide you with a spiritual benefit. Harming the body harms the spirit.

The bad theology here is that body and spirit are somehow separate and that the body is bad, base, low and the spirit is pure, and that if you punish your body, your spirit will be freed from your instincts, urges, and animal desires. I thought that was the wrong perspective before I even started fasting. But if that's wrong, what's right?

Well, fasting has brought me deeply in touch with my body, my physical needs, my appetites. I'm not usually a person who pays too much attention to that kinda stuff—needs, etc. Well, when you're fasting, no matter what, you're in touch with your physical being. And I discovered that the more I was in touch with my body, with what it was telling me, with how it was communicating to me, with what it wanted and didn't want, the more I felt in touch with my self—my whole self—including my spirit.

I've realized more deeply that the body and the spirit or soul are not separate things. They are intimately connected, bound together. This is one of the biggest misunderstandings throughout history of our Christian tradition. Christianity declares: God became flesh! And Jesus could've ditched his

lousy body when he went off to heaven, but he didn't, did he? He decided to hang onto it up there. In Christianity, even at the level of God in Heaven, matter and spirit, body and soul, through Christ have become reconciled and unified.

Over the last 49 days I've learned that for me fasting is not an act of self-denial, but an act of holistic love. My theme this Lent in my preaching is "Bigger Than Me." I'm not fasting to deny my self, I'm fasting to bring my self into loving balance with that which is bigger than me and beyond me. And this works not because the body is bad and if you beat it up your Spirit escapes it somehow. It works because when I intentionally and lovingly connect to my physical body, I come into deeper connection and balance with my self, with my spirit, and with God.

Lesson Number 2 is practical: Fasting Is Consciousness Raising

The USDA says that adults need between 1,600 and 3,000 calories per day depending on age, sex, weight, activity level, etc. The USDA also tracks that our food system in 2021 provided 3,864 calories per day for every person in the United States, including children. So, our food system is producing hundreds of calories more per day than any of us actually need. The companies that sell food are not content to let those calories go wasted, and they have strong profit incentives to entice us to eat more. New research is showing that highly processed foods which pack a lot of calories into easily digestible tasty little bites can be addictive and that we tend to eat more when we eat highly processed foods than when we eat whole foods.

In an environment where there's a feast all around us, which is being marketed to us everywhere we look, actually getting in touch with what our bodies need and want can be very powerful and balancing. As I mentioned before, I was eating fairly unconsciously. I wasn't eating mindfully or intentionally. I wasn't thinking, what does my body need today, what does it want? I was just kind of shoveling coal onto the fire. I wouldn't say that I was eating compulsively, but I was eating unintentionally, without love, without care, without gratitude. And there were plenty of times that I was eating when I wasn't hungry at all. I was eating because I was stressed or bored and the food dampened the discomfort or those feelings and enabled me not to have to think about what it was that I actually needed in that moment to be holistically healthy.

So, by fasting, I've taken an activity that in my life (eating) that had become a sort of unconscious, unintentional act, and I've raised my level of mindfulness and made it conscious. Eating is so fundamentally important to our daily lives and health that anything that can help us to do it mindfully and intentionally is a good thing. Over the last 49 days I've learned so much about what my body needs and doesn't need. And I've had to confront all those little instances of discomfort when I wanted to run to the snack cabinet and grab a bag of chips, and I've had to deal with them on their own terms instead of quieting them down with comforting, readily available calories.

Lesson number 3 has been inspirational: As Anne Lamott once wrote, "It's good to do uncomfortable things. It's weight training for life."

I've discovered over the last 49 days that there's a connection between being intentional and aware and being uncomfortable. It's not just when you're fasting or doing something hard, whenever you're really paying attention, whenever you're being purposeful, whenever you're intentionally trying to grow, whenever we want to connect to that which is bigger than me, we're going to be a little uncomfortable. So, it benefits us to occasionally or regularly engage in spiritual practices that challenge us and make us uncomfortable. Because it expands our capacity to be fully alive and engaged with the world. Fasting has slimmed me down, physically. But I feel spiritually bigger than I did before.

So, to sum it all up: Fasting connects us to one of the most radical realities of Christianity—that body and spirit are united together. Fasting raises our consciousness: By eliminating all unintentional eating, we begin to listen to what our body is telling us about what it wants to eat and when it wants to eat. And we're forced to confront anything else in our lives we were avoiding by eating yummy stuff. Fasting is good for us when done in healthy holistic moderation because it's good for us to do uncomfortable things. Uncomfortable spiritual exercises increase our capacity to do uncomfortable things like raising our consciousness, living intentionally, discovering our purpose in life, paying attention, and growing. If you've decide to fast or give something up this Lent, I pray that it feels like an act of holistic love, that it connects you more deeply to your self and to God, and that inspires you to grow on your spiritual journey.