

“Fruitbearing Practices: Intention”
Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Isaiah 58:1-12, Luke 4:1-13

Our Old Testament passage this morning comes from the 58th chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. Most scholars believe that this portion of Isaiah was written some time after the people had returned from the Babylonian Exile. They had seen their enemies defeated by the Persians, and the Persian king Cyrus had issued an edict in 538 B.C. allowing them to return to their land. But now the people of God were engaged in the hard and stressful work of rebuilding their lives, their structures, and their community. Because the prophets had interpreted the Exile to be a consequence of their lack of faithfulness, the people were determined not to make that mistake again. They would try to get it right this time. One of the ways they opted for to make sure they “got it right” was to engage in the regular practice of fasting: not eating for a time, denying themselves, to show their devotion to God.

Fasting is a time-honored practice in more than one world religion, based on the understanding that pangs of physical hunger can put us in touch with our deeper spiritual hunger and thereby draw us into the presence of the Divine. Listen as Isaiah tries to get the people to understand that the way to God’s heart is not finally through acts of fasting and self-deprivation. The way to God’s heart is through the practice of justice, mercy, and compassion. Furthermore, Isaiah seems to say that unless fasting and other forms of self-denial eventuate in justice, mercy, and compassion, such fasting is worse than useless. *Read Isaiah here.*

Our Gospel text is from Luke’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. To set the context, Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. He’s just had the Spirit descend upon him in bodily form like a dove. He’s just heard the voice from heaven saying, “You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And now, after Luke inserts a brief interlude providing Jesus’ genealogy, this Spirit that has descended upon Jesus leads him into the wilderness.

For forty days, Jesus eats nothing, so he is famished. Notice as you hear the text how Jesus’ fasting, rather than making him more vulnerable to temptation, appears to make him more focused, more able to face down the Tempter. Pay attention, too, to how Jesus seems to have the words of scripture right at his disposal. In response to each of the temptations, Jesus quotes a different portion of the book of Deuteronomy. He has internalized its words, and they come in handy in a time of need. *Read Luke here.*

If you were here last Sunday, you know that our Spiritual Growth Council has made “The Fruit of the Spirit” their theme for this spring, leading us up to an All Church Retreat on April 24th and 25th. The Fruit of the Spirit, or the characteristics of the Fruit of the Spirit in the Apostle Paul’s list to the Galatians are *love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control*. It is a wonderful list: easy to read, a little less easy to experience. But the more centered we are in the Spirit and love of the God we have come to know in Jesus (who calls us to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves), the more this fruit grows naturally in our lives.

But how do we become and remain centered in the Spirit, the love of God, so that we can bear this fruit? I think that’s a good question to keep in front of us during this season of Lent, a season of preparation and spiritual reflection. So I’ve decided that over the course of the Sundays leading up to Easter I will preach a series of sermons on several of what I am calling fruit bearing practices.

Those of you who have read Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World* (and if you haven't yet, I encourage you to do so), know that even the most ordinary of activities, approached with some intention (like paying attention to the beauty of a sunset or the intricacy of a mosquito, or going about the work of shoveling snow or cleaning a toilet, or getting lost, or feeling pain, or appreciating your body) can become a means for us to experience the holy.¹ They can become for us spiritual practices which draw us closer to God and thereby help us to bear the fruit that the Apostle Paul talks about. You also know, if you read her book, that she said the list of practices she covered was not exhaustive. So I want to focus on several practices that she didn't, in part because I don't want to compete with Barbara Brown Taylor.

The first fruit bearing practice I want to deal with flows out of the ancient spiritual discipline of fasting, a practice that both our text from Isaiah and our text from Luke address. The idea of fasting, whether abstaining from a particular food or category of food, or giving up food altogether, or giving up something else, has become so associated with the season of Lent that one of the questions you are likely to hear in church circles around this time of year is, "So, what are *you* giving up for Lent?" We often joke about that. In response to the question someone will say, "Me? I'm giving up broccoli!" Or as Don DiLoreto says when you ask him, "I'm giving up bubblegum and watermelon." And I might say that I am giving up mustard, beets, and liver.

A fellow pastor in this presbytery posted on his Facebook page this week that he is giving up snow shoveling for Lent. I thought that was a pretty hopeful statement. I immediately reached for the like button. The truth, of course, is that giving up something we don't particularly like or to which we don't have access is not all that hard. It's not much of a sacrifice.

There can be great benefit in intentionally, for a period of time, giving up something that we value. The absence of what we have come to rely upon and take for granted (whether it is chocolate, sweets, soda, or the TV that I have at various times and with various degrees of success and failure tried to give up) can, like not eating altogether, put us more in touch with our deeper spiritual hunger for God. It can help us become more focused. It can draw us closer to the Divine Presence within, around, and beyond us. But it also may not.

A colleague of mine has helped me think more clearly about the things we give up in Lent by reminding me that denial is not the purpose of Lent, transformation is.

*"Lent is the season in which we prepare to encounter Christ's sacrifice by endeavoring to become more Christ-like ourselves. Transformation is about letting ourselves be filled with God's presence so that we can be shaped by God's grace. Our acts of...denying ourselves in order to empty ourselves enough to allow God to fill us are means to an end. They are disciplines that prepare us to be transformed. We deny ourselves so that we can be reborn as new creations - to live more fully as the Kingdom citizens God desires us to be."*²

But here is the interesting thing. *Denial for the sake of denial often achieves the opposite purpose.* Giving up coffee, my friend says, doesn't make her a better follower of Christ, it just makes her more irritable and more of a witch with a capital B. Giving up Facebook doesn't help her build community in the body of Christ, it simply helps her as a detached introverted person creep further into her shell. Those disciplines don't assist her in emptying herself in order to let God in. Instead, she says, "They simply fill me with more of *me*."³

The fasting and self-denial that Isaiah railed against in speaking to the people of Israel was a fasting that filled them with more focus on themselves and their own private sense of connection to God. So he told them that the fast that was acceptable in God's sight was taking something on: feeding the hungry, reaching out to the poor, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, letting the oppressed go free. Whether we take something on or let something go, or both, the question is whether or not this leads us to bear fruit, or whether it simply fills us with more and more of ourselves.

When I was in college, some people in the religious studies program in which I was a participant decided that for Lent one year we would give up our lunches in the cafeteria. We had worked out a deal with the school administration and the dining service so that the money we would have spent on meals would be sent to Heifer Project International to buy animals for people in Third World villages. I look back on that as one of the best fasts in which I have ever engaged. Why? Not simply because I denied myself (I certainly was hungry around lunch time), but because my actions helped somebody else have food.

I read this week about a challenge issued by an organization called Blood: Water: Mission to give up drinking all beverages but water during this season of Lent and then taking the money that you would have spent on soda, coffee, alcohol, or some other beverage of choice and donating it towards providing safe drinking water through wells and pumps in Uganda.⁴ Our own Tommy Tysse was in Uganda this January helping build some of those wells. Now THAT is a fast.

On Friday night, my daughters took part in what they call the 30-Hour Famine, sponsored by World Vision. They were doing this through the youth group at Trinity Presbyterian in Arlington, where my wife Judith is a pastor. Various youth groups participate in the Famine, and some do it at different points during the year, but the first weekend in Lent is a great time for it. Anyway, my daughters went for thirty hours without food, from lunchtime on Friday to dinner time on Saturday without food except for some juice here and there. What happened with them is:

- (1) they learned a little bit about what it is like to really feel hungry;
- (2) they were educated to the fact that 29,000 children a day die due to starvation and malnutrition⁵; and
- (3) they raised some money to help provide food for people who need it.

We did a 30-Hour Famine one year at the church I served in North Carolina. One of our middle schoolers, a sixth grade boy, said to Judith, "Please, please, don't make us do this." He loved to eat. Thirty hours later, he became one of the greatest advocates for doing something about hunger that the church had ever seen.

What else might you and I consider giving up, if it is not a food, or a meal, or a beverage, or all beverages but water? I was talking to someone in the congregation about what she is giving up and what I might give up. She said, "I'm giving up mindless computer games." I thought, "That's a good thing to give up. I'll do that, too." I don't play them often, but when I get home at night, or when I'm on my Monday Sabbath, why should I sit in front of the computer wasting time playing Spider Solitaire, letting my brain veg out, when I could be engaging meaningfully with my family, or giving someone a phone call, or reading a book, or doing something that really nourishes my soul. I have to report that since Ash Wednesday, there have been some times when I have reached for the games button. And as I reach, I think, well Fran and I kind of have a deal. So far I'm keeping that fast.

What is it that you might give up?

The moderator of our denomination, Bruce Reyes-Chow, who is a few years younger than I am, has decided that what he will be giving up for Lent in order to draw him closer to God is: *being unwarrantedly cranky, holding selfish grudges, and treating people he does not like as if they do not matter to God.*⁶ That's a pretty good thing to give up.

What might you or I take on?

Perhaps you are already taking part in our Year of the Bible program readings. But if you are not, Lent is not a bad time to join us, to hop on that train, as it were. We are in Leviticus, which is a difficult place to jump into the Bible, I admit. But that might be something to take on.

Or perhaps you might pick up the Holy Habits devotional book that the Worship Committee has made available for us through Lent, and use it to guide your daily devotions in this season.

Or how about this? What about resolving through the season of Lent to at least one time a day reach out to someone you don't know very well and say a kind word. Maybe it is the cashier at Safeway, to whom might you speak a kind word? (Probably not Andre, because Andre knows everybody. But even he needs to hear a kind word every now and then.)

What is it that you or I might take on? After all, Lent is in part about the practice of intention. Intentionally giving something up, intentionally taking something on. I invite you to join me in it.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ See Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World* (New York: Harper One, 2009).

² Julie Clawson, in a post entitled "Preparing for Lent" in her blog *Onehandclapping* on February 16, 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.bloodwatermission.com/>

⁵ <http://famine2010.org/>

⁶ Bruce Reyes-Chow posted this on his Facebook page.