

First Sunday of Lent March 9, 2014 A

FINDING VALUE AND MEANING IN FASTING

We know from today's Gospel that Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights in the desert. As a result, fasting has been tied to the Lenten Season since the early days of our Church.

While fasting can include things other than food, fasting from food should be a part of our Lenten journey. I say this because in the desert Jesus fasted from food.

But you may wonder what value there is in fasting from food. In the following article Victor Parachin gives us no less than 14 reasons for fasting:

On February 6, 1756, a frightened and somber king of England called for a day of solemn prayer and fasting. Behind his call was the immediate threat of an invasion and war by the French. Later that evening, John Wesley recorded in his journal the powerful and positive effect a day of fasting and prayer had upon the nation:

The fast day was a glorious day such as London has scarce seen . . . Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquility.

In a footnote, he added: "*Humility was turned into national rejoicing, for the threatened invasion of the French was averted.*"

In spite of the fact that the Bible refers to fasting nearly 100 times, it remains a discipline that is absent from the lives of many Christians. Yet, fasting is connected to people whose lives were filled with spiritual power and moral authority. Greater religious leaders such as Moses, Elijah, Daniel, Jesus, Origen, Martin Luther, Ignatius of Loyola and Jonathan Edwards were known to fast, often for prolonged periods of time.

Although most Christians may not feel the need to do a lengthy fast, there are benefits to be gained from even a short period of self-denial. Here are **14 reasons why fasting is a good discipline to engage in periodically.**

1. Fasting expands compassion. It is easy to talk about the problem of world hunger, but the physical impact and emotional awareness is heightened when we do without food. "My sensitivity to the plight of the poor increased," said one woman who fasted. "Eating only one meal a day made me tired and resentful and mine was a voluntary fast. What was it like for those who were lucky to get one meal a day? I couldn't be indifferent to their suffering once I'd shared it."

2. Fasting is a way of preparing to meet a major challenge. People in the bible who faced great trials and troubles often dealt with them through prayer and fasting. Whenever special courage, insight or strength was needed, they turned to prayer combined with fasting. For example, before Queen Esther approached the king asking him to spare the Jews from destruction, she asked her people to spend three days in prayer and fasting. She felt that such a difficult enterprise needed prayers fortified by fasting if her effort was to be successful. "When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish," she said (Est. 4:16).

Consequently, Esther approached the king with confidence and boldness, persuading him to reverse an edict that called for the annihilation of the Jews. A modern application would be to spend time in prayer and fasting whenever a personal or professional crisis looms.

3. Fasting can enlighten others. This use of fasting as a teaching tool and a moral imperative to change was exercised by Mahatma Gandhi. Early in the struggle against British rule over India, Gandhi conducted a fast in prison for the violent excesses of his followers who did not practice his teaching of nonviolence against British authorities. Later, Gandhi fasted to persuade the government to remove discriminatory laws against people considered "untouchable."

4. Fasting improves physical health. Increasing evidence indicates that people are healthier and live longer when calories are reduced. Health researchers state that caloric restrictions extend health as well as

life, dramatically lowering the risk of many age-related problems, including most cancers, heart disease and diabetes. One example comes from residents of Okinawa where calorie consumption is 30 percent below Japanese norms. The island's residents have an unusually high percentage of centenarians.

5. Fasting benefit others. There are practical opportunities connected with fasting. The money saved by not eating can be shared with others. Consider the experience of Ron, a Midwest attorney. "Most workdays I eat lunch out at a restaurant, usually with clients or colleagues. Last year, during Lent, I decided to skip lunch once a week. I remained in my office reading devotional materials and offering prayers. Each week I set aside the money I would have spent on lunch. When Lent was over, I mailed a check off to a homeless shelter in the community."

6. Fasting creates more time for additional spiritual disciplines. Beware of saying, "I haven't time to read the Bible, or to pray"; say rather, "I haven't disciplined myself to do these things," noted Scottish minister and author Oswald Chamber. Busy people in various professions are often forced to skip meals in order to meet emergencies and assist others. Likewise, Christians can find good use of the additional time created by not having to prepare and eat a meal.

7. Fasting is good for the soul. "Irrational feeding darkens the soul and makes it unfit for spiritual experiences," observed Thomas Aquinas. Those who fast report that the practice leads to spiritual renewal, increased insight, deeper commitment, clarity of life purpose and greater intimacy with God.

8. Fasting is a reminder that we do not live by "bread alone." Although food provides physical strength and energy for the body, the discipline of fasting provides the soul with stamina and vitality. In the New Testament, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Behind that statement is the truth that people experience a hunger that cannot be filled merely by food and other material things. Ultimately, meaning, satisfaction and fulfillment in life result from a healthy relationship to God. Fasting is one way of nurturing that relationship.

9. Fasting is a positive response against materialism. "We are constantly bombarded by advertising telling us that we must have this or that to be healthy, happy, popular or wise," said Allen S. Maller, Rabbi of Temple Akiba in Culver City, Colorado. "By fasting, we assert

that we need not be totally dependent on external things, even such essentials as food. If our most basic need for food and drink can be suspended for 24 hours, how much more our needs for all the nonessentials?"

10. Fasting creates more physical and mental energy. Ironically, going without a meal often results in greater energy and vitality. German physician, Dr. Hellmut Lutzner, author of *Successful Fasting*, observed: *Strength, speed, perseverance and concentration are by no means a function of your food intake. On the contrary, you think better and more quickly when your stomach is not full. What mountain climber would eat just before his climb? A runner will never reach her peak performance if she eats just before the start of the race.*

The same principles apply to the spiritual life. An overloaded stomach can interfere with prayer by making us feel sluggish and tired.

11. Fasting helps us appreciate things more. One man who fasted over a weekend broke his fast with a simple meal of soup. "After not eating for two days, the soup tasted unbelievably delicious," he said. "Every spoonful was like eating from an entire banquet. Prior to my fasting experience I would have merely eaten the soup without any awareness of its flavor, texture or taste."

12. Fasting strengthens virtues and weakens vices. "All great virtues bear the imprint of self-denial," observed Unitarian minister and essayist William Ellery Channing. Time in prayer combined with denial of food is effective in expanding the boundaries of the heart and soul. People who pray and fast regularly often experience compassion, kindness, sensitivity and love for others. They become less judgmental and more understanding. True humility is developed while false pride is reduced.

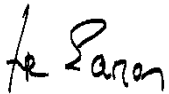
13. Fasting is good for self-discipline. Many people operate on the premise that a primary goal in life is to always be happy and free of pain or discomfort. Our culture makes it easy for us to become extremely self-indulgent. We are in danger of becoming less resilient than our pioneer ancestors. Fasting is an effective antidote to the increasing "softness" in life. A life that reaches out for every comfort and pleasure becomes weak, sluggish, flaccid and fragile. It is a life devoid of fulfillment and meaning. "No pain, no balm; no cross, no crown," noted William Penn.

14. Fasting is a way of following the example of Christ and the apostles. Prior to his public ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in prayer and fasting (Mt. 4:1). Also, Jesus expected his followers to fast. He said, "*When you fast,*" not "*if you fast,*" in Matthew 6:16. The missionary team of Paul and Barnabas are reported in Scripture as fasting frequently before important decisions concerning the Early church ministry (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23). What better model can we follow?

Reflection questions

Which of the above reasons for fasting made sense to you? What other reasons are there for fasting? What form of fasting are you doing for Lent? Why have you chosen that particular form of fasting?

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Sarah". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.