

“Self-Discipline?”

Zechariah 8:14-19; Psalm 69;
Acts 13:1-4; Matthew 6:16-18

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When I first realized that we were going to light candles and have an All Saints Day remembrance, and then looked at the scripture passage for today about fasting, I wondered how the two were going to fit together. For a moment I was a little confused. When I first thought about it, it didn't feel like fasting and remembering went together. But as I looked back on the history of fasting, what I realized is that fasting is often part of grief. Throughout the history of the Israelites there was often fasting that went along with grieving and remembering.

Some suggest that when we grieve, we don't feel like eating, so there's a sense of just letting it go. Perhaps it's a recognition that we don't want that other sustenance right now; we want to focus on the sustenance that was the relationship that we are remembering, that we are grieving. So fasting fits incredibly well with our remembering those who have gone before us, the importance of who those people were, the relationships we've had and shared, the saints of the church that have enabled us to be here today.

I think Jesus is going beyond that here. He is suggesting that fasting is not only something we do in grief as we remember those who have gone before, it is also a way of remembering and making room for something else. Perhaps if we start by looking at the idea that fasting is to let go of that which sustains us, we see that it really is an “appetite-denying discipline,” as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message* translation. It's a literal appetite-denying discipline. We deny ourselves food in fasting. That's not a discipline that we have held up highly, particularly in the Presbyterian Church, but it is worth thinking about. Fasting is a time of denying our own appetite—particularly I'm thinking about that which sustains us: food and drink, but particularly food—to think about what else might sustain us.

We can get so focused on our own appetite that we forget the full range of that which sustains us. That's one of things I think we do in grief. We let go of the appetite for food to think about the relationship that has sustained us. We can do the same thing with God, and think about how that relationship sustains us. We can let go of the appetite. In fact, even in the process of letting something go, it might help remind us of what else is there.

Sometimes, we will give up something for Lent. In letting go of that particular thing, we can use that as a reminder whenever we have a desire for that thing. We remember. If we give up chocolate, then when we want chocolate, the idea is that you remember God. You take a moment at that time to remember.

But it's not only a fasting from sustenance to remember the sustaining power and nature of God. I think in this day and age there are moments we need to fast or to let go of

what we think we need—the desires and wants, and also, just the noise of all those voices speaking into our lives, telling us what we should want. We can “save more and live more” by shopping. We can go to “the happiest place on earth” and ride some rides. We should have whatever we want. We should “just do it.” I think we could probably go on finding all the different ways we are told we should basically have whatever we want. We should go after our desires. Very few ads are going to say you should put your appetites on hold so you can make room in your life for other things.

I think that’s what Jesus is inviting us to do—to have an appetite-denying discipline, to have some self-discipline that allows us to open up room in our lives to see beyond our individual wants. What I’m fasting from is myself, my own desires and appetites, what I think sustains me. In the fasting, the opportunity is to turn toward God. I believe when we make room and allow God to be in our lives, in that fasting, God will also turn us to see others.

So it’s an invitation to make room. We do that in our services. Perhaps it is because there are so many voices speaking into our lives, so much of the time there is so much noise, we take moments of silence. We are invited in the silence to turn to God. When we fast from ourselves, then we can give. When we fast from ourselves, we can pray. In the fasting, we can turn to God. When we turn to God, God knows. We don’t have to put on a sad face. We don’t have to let people know what we’re doing. God knows.

I invite you to think about something in your life that you can fast from to create for a little time some appetite-denying discipline, some self-denial. What might be some little thing that you might want to deny this week? A second cup of coffee? Some screen time? What is it for you that you might deny yourself, and allow to prompt you to instead take that time to pray or to think about where you might give, serve, follow Christ? In that time, there is also that opportunity to ask yourself whether your perceived needs and desires are helpful. How much of it is just a perception? Are your perceived needs and desires in the way of your right relationship with God?

I believe God is present with us, forgives us, gives us grace, and leads us into life. Fasting—a little self-denial, a little self-discipline—helps us open up to God with us.

Let’s pray:

Lord, let us open up to you. Help us take those moments. Help us turn aside something that just takes up time. Help us to listen, to be aware of your presence with us. Remind us of your forgiveness, and that your love enables us to live, and how you want to lead us further in and further up, into life. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.