

You are what you eat, Jesus said.

Or, how did he say it... “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (Jn 6:27).

I think he means we are what we eat!

We become what we consume, what we devour, what we fill ourselves with, what we think will make us satisfied.

Today I am inviting you to consider fasting.

Now, I don't mean this new fad of intermittent fasting (which is harder than you think, especially when you get the munchies at around 10:00 while watching the next installment of *Midsummer Murders*). No. Not that kind of fasting. Today I am inviting you to consider the ancient spiritual discipline of fasting: of being empty of craving, of noticing our pangs of unfulfillment, of making room.

We read in our Bible stories that there were two main points of fasting in Jewish tradition: The first, was as a practice of repentance, and perhaps humbling oneself and one's community before God in the face of imminent destruction, which was, of course, understood as punishment for the sin that needed the repenting.

Think of the whole population (including the cows) of Nineveh fasting in sackcloth and ashes to show their promise to “turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands” (Jonah 3:8)

The second main point of fasting in ancient Jewish tradition was to prepare oneself inwardly for receiving the necessary strength and grace to complete a mission of faithful service in God's name. Think here of Jesus in the desert at the beginning of his ministry.

But what's the point of fasting today? We see stories of public fasting for political protest, like Gandhi, but is fasting otherwise an old-fashioned and irrelevant practice, maybe reserved for the inconvenience of spending Lent without chocolate?

What place does fasting have when I can get most any fruit or vegetable at any time of the year? And when one of our major health concerns in our country is obesity? What place does fasting have when at my slightest whim, I can go online and buy what I want and have it mailed to me? And when acquiring more stuff is synonymous with the successful life? What place does fasting have when a constant stream of entertainment is at my fingertips? And when quietness seems to be a limited resource?

The practice of fasting says, “**no more**”. The practice of fasting interrupts us when what we consume begins to consume us, and when what we possess is in danger of possessing us. Biblical fasting, whether it was about repentance or preparation, was always about cleaning out and making room. Fasting from food and making room in one's stomach is symbolic of clearing out everything that doesn't satisfy, everything that gets in the way of following God, everything we think we need to depend on, and making room for God to stretch out and see what can happen in the space we've created within ourselves.

Jesus reminds us of this in the John passage that Glenn read for us. He says, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life which the Son of Man will give to you” and later when he says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Jesus is asking us followers: Will you let me feed you? Will you trust me to give you what you really need?

You see, biblical fasting – feeling the inner hunger pangs – reminds us of the limits that restore our lives, like the limits that allow a field to lie fallow before springing forth into rich grain again. We need to make space for the Spirit to breathe a fresh breath of air.

Ten years ago at this time, I was just holding on – I had pastored for 6 years and I was ready to jump into my sabbatical which was just 4 months away and yet so out of reach. Six years and 35 funerals later plus the weekly tasks of preparing a sermon, visiting and preaching left me enriched in some ways, and in others almost bereft of a soul.

I went to England, Scotland and Wales for the first month of my Sabbatical. And as I woke to the pace of my sabbatical meanderings that first week, I noticed a subtle change in my spirit. An awakening – perhaps... definitely a letting go of my duties and obligations and worries about the congregation.

I don't think I put words to it until a few weeks later, though, when I found myself hiking through the barren hills of the Isle of Skye, in Scotland. The word that kept coming to me with a sense of gratitude, was "spacious".

That was the physical geography I was seeing, a spacious landscape. Bleak, yes but also stark. Desolate, yes but also stunning, Sharp and Misty, dark and eerie yet sacred, and thin and thick with the Divine. Rocky and Primeval yet fresh and full of life.

I began to realize that this also described the landscape within myself. A landscape was opening up within me that let me see life as I hadn't been able to for so long with my head down and my feet running. I realized that my heart, while loving, had been longing pining yearning for a fast. And it was only when I could step out of the business that the Spirit of God could move unimpeded, and my thoughts and my spirit were once again united.

I wrote in my blog: "So [this landscape] makes me think about all those things in our world that look bleak and dark and eerie...or situations in our world or lives that seem harsh, desolate, and hopeless. And I think about the rain that I cursed this week as I walked and the mist that hangs over this island.

I was reminded that it wouldn't be so green if the rain wasn't so ever-present. Am I inconvenienced? Yes. But the rain falls on the just and the unjust -or not- because it does. What would the trees think if I decided to stop the rain on my whim? What about the heather? The moss? The little lambs hopping about?"

Maybe this story has more to do with a Sabbath experience than a fasting experience, but I think those two things are closely connected. We choose to fast from things that are basically good for us. If they're bad for us, then we need that good old repentance and turning away. But the things that are good for us can also become twisted and destructive if we allow our appetites to rule us, or if we are unable or unwilling to stop.

A fast from food can be a powerful way to remind us of our hunger for God, and also of the hunger of those at our neighbourhood food bank. A fast from our constant stream of noble pastoral activities, as I discovered in Scotland, may be the most important way these days to make room to notice God showing up.

What might we begin to face within the quietness of our own souls if we fast from some of that constant stream of noise? What would we hear? What would we learn? I suspect we would quickly learn that we use the noise and the busyness to cover up a hole within ourselves that is yearning to be filled. The practice of fasting exposes this hole and doesn't try to quickly cover it up.

This is what I learned later in my Sabbatical, when I found myself on a self-imposed hermitage with nothing by my dogs, the rain and the radio. I learned that God doesn't need me – but God wants me – all of me – even the slimy bits and the arrogant bits and the snooty and gossipy, angry and ugly bits as well as the creative bits, the joyful bits, the hearty laugh out loud, genuine compassion and intuitive bits. And I found, during my Sabbatical fast that I don't only need God but I want God...I yearn for God..."

When we fast, we can begin to remember that God turns the world, not us, and we don't need to turn the world to be worthy of God's love.

Author Macrina Wiederkehr writes this: *"Fasting is cleansing. It cleans out our bodies. It lays bare our souls, It leads us into the arms of that One for whom we hunger. In the Divine Arms we become less demanding and more like the One who holds us. Then we experience new hungers. We hunger and thirst for justice, for goodness and holiness. We hunger for what is right. We hunger to be saints. Most of us are not nearly hungry enough for the things that really matter. That's why it is so good for us to feel a gnawing in our guts.*

"Then we remember why we are fasting. We remember all the peoples of the world who have no choice but to go to bed hungry. We remember we waste and squander the goods of this world. We remember what poor stewards of the earth we have been, We remember that each of us is called to be bread for the world. Our lives are meant to nourish. Fasting can lead us to the core of our being and make us more nourishing for others".¹

This is what we heard in Isaiah, too. Isaiah was speaking God's words to a community that went through the motions of the practice of fasting.

Just "not eating" doesn't make us closer to God. But it's what we allow those pangs of emptiness, that feeling of being unfulfilled to do to transform us. What are we making space for?

God says through Isaiah's mouth, "A true fast makes room for my kingdom. Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs 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?"

And then, we are promised, "if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail".

¹Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 37.

You see, on the other side of fasting is feasting. Feasting on the bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Like the Manna and quail in the desert, God gives abundantly what we need. And we don't know what we need until we stop hoarding and make room.

As we fast from food, from activity, from work, from noise, from entertainment, from social media, we are, at the same time, invited to feast on justice, peace, cleansing, empowering grace, and unconditional, all-encompassing love and all of the amazing and surprising ways that God will choose to fill us with abundant life once we've made enough room for it.

How will you make room for Jesus to be your bread of life this season? What kind of housecleaning will you do to rid yourself of distraction and re-focus on what really satisfies? From what will you fast so that you can feast on God's grace and Christ's peace?