

“Fasting”
March 20, 2011
Grove Presbyterian Church

Lent began as the hard season that prepared rookie Christians for baptism. They had to prove they were ready. You must change; it isn't as if Christ adapts to fit us. These Christian novices would fast, pray, study the Bible. When you have that edge of hunger you're naturally more alert, more productive, more attentive than when you've stuffed yourself.

Ash Wednesday christens Lent by reminding us that all things are finite, including ourselves. We only have so much time, so we better spend it well. Life requires effort. Life requires forbearance. These novices would learn to live within limits. Life is limited. Resources are limited.

Besides, if you don't show up for practice, can you really consider yourself part of the team?

Although we Presbyterians historically have ignored this whole liturgical calendar thing, perhaps we can appreciate this tradition of Lenten sacrifice. There is virtue in fasting (so I'm told). Cleansing the body while proving we can hold firmly to a discipline.

Once upon a time, Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday), had its psychological place – the last big bang to clear out the scraps of the cupboard before the long weeks of abstinence. Of course, nowadays, nobody stops partying – it is all Mardi Gras, all indulgence, all the time.

I recently received the gift of a Japanese wall-hanging. It depicts a Confucius-like figure holding a pomegranate toward a monkey. Since I cannot read Japanese, I researched what this painting might represent. From Japan to India, prevalent is the concept of the 'monkey mentality,' inspired by the frantic, frenetic, greedy ways monkeys dart about devouring as much fruit as possible. The wall-hanging illustrates a teacher training us monkeys to discipline our grasping natures. I might just hang it in my kitchen.

Wait a minute now. We've talked about monkeys, how about geese and ganders? If we regular folks are going to commit to fasting, to this healthier life of stoicism and asceticism, shouldn't we expect the same from the Brahmins, Bureaucrats, and Bankers?

After all, if the government is going to rightly expect firefighters, police, teachers, to sacrifice and chip in on their pensions and medical insurance, what are the legislators and corporate bosses going to sacrifice? A matter of fairness.

I just returned from a few days in Jersey. It's become a little more poignant with the my family planning to sell the homestead, with a business of 70 years failing in today's

economy. What in God's name is the New Jersey government doing spending money on casinos, lotteries, and helping build sport stadiums in cities for overpaid entertainers called athletes? If it isn't free to the public, such as libraries or parks, what in heaven's name is government doing building these monuments to ego and privilege. When life is scarce, when life requires a balancing act between famine and food, we simply lack the carrying capacity to support these civic drunkards and gluttons, those who suck up resources without giving much back.

Can anybody tell me why somebody who can dribble a soccer ball or hit a fast ball (or their agents or the NFL corporate executives who are there only to count the piles of dollars we are gullible enough to pay for tickets, Jerseys, and junk) should make more money than an elementary school teacher?

Ought Banks practice a Lenten fast? Sure. They can start with credit cards, the Spawn of Satan. Who at corporate headquarters invents these nefarious ways of stuffing credit cards into the wallets of the poor? What happened to means testing? How come the richest folk get the lowest interest rates while those fighting the tar baby of debt get hit with interest rates that make the Mafia look like Mary Poppins.

Should our Brahmin rich fast? When is enough enough for you? Who among you will have the faithfulness and responsibility, the courage and decency to say no to the next raise or bonus or golden parachute?

If you don't show up for practice, can you really consider yourself part of the team?

Listen:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

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Everyone of Jesus' followers fasted.

Jesus himself fasted.

Jesus takes it for granted we will fast.

How to fast?

Can you do it in silence? Without announcing it to anyone? Can you do it without being braggy? Can you do it without looking around for applause?

When do you know it is time to fast?

Whenever something else controls you. If you cannot give it up, it owns you.

Why fast?

The best motive for an ascetic, disciplined, busy life, is to equip us for sleeker, trim, efficient, athletic service. Never stuff yourself on Tuna Fish sandwiches before running a marathon.

Besides, we fast for more than personal self-improvement. The less we ourselves consume, the more others might have for their needs. The less I gorge, the more there is for those who are really hungry.

Besides, the less we consume the less we cause our brother or sister to stumble by us fostering and furthering this perverse culture of consumption.

Besides, when you fast, you remind yourself you what you really need and what you really don't need. Amazing but true: you can live without Ring Dings, credit cards, cell phones, even two cars. If you can discipline your appetites, then you can discipline the more important aspects of your life.

Besides, fasting reminds us our bodies are not our own. These bodies do not belong to us. They belong to God. Our bodies belong to each other. We have a responsibility to treat them kindly and properly.

Besides, when you fast, when you deny yourself, you remind yourself that in life you never will get everything you want.

Besides, if you can't control your flesh appetites how can you hope to control anything else? If you cannot avoid the temptation of chocolate for 40 days, how in God's sweet name are you going to avoid the temptation of sweeter and more appealing temptations, such as spiritual pride?

- Or the delightful sin of criticizing others for their sins?
- Or the temptations of using others?
- Or the pleasures of power or juicy hatred?

We speak of the sins of the flesh (sins of the animal self) versus sins of the spirit (the diabolical self). Which really are worse vices?¹

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity; On Chastity

So, with Lent upon us, I'm trying to figure out what I need to do to suppress my own monkey mentality. If I expect it of Government, Bankers, and the Rich, I better pony up too.

Trying to fast while slouching on the couch is a disaster. When I'm busy, I can easily go without food; when I loaf about, that's when I pull out the Twinkies, Ring Dings, Chips....

It helps if you stop eating before you feel stuffed.

It helps if you focus on necessities rather than wants.

It helps if you replace it with something positive, such as with more time with friends, exercise, reading, prayer, or doing good works.

Which unhealthy personal habits ought I change? Which junk food in my life ought I give up? Perhaps I need to abstain from far more than chocolate or booze.

- How about a texting fast – actually talk with your friends
- How about a credit card fast?
- Or a television fast (reading more instead)?
- Or fast food fasts?
- Or a gasoline fast (walking to work twice a week)?
- Or a gossiping fast?
- Or a judgmentalism fast?
- Or a cynicism fast?

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How do you cultivate beautiful roses? You prune the canes. Painful prunings.

Life always is richer by subtraction than addition.

Let's compare dinner plates. Here is one from the 1930's. Let's compare it to a modern dinner plate. Why is this modern plate so much larger? Easy. They then were use to less. We today always want more.

*“Is there not yet oppression in the country?
A starving of men and a pampering of dogs”
– John Donne*

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The belly, wise teachers say, is the first test. If we can control our appetites, then we just might have a chance on handling the rest.