



“What Are You ‘Adding’ For Lent?”

Texts: Isaiah 58:3-9, Psalm 51:1-7, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There’s been a good bit of discussion around out house on what will be “given up” for Lent. The culture has taken up the small piece of the Lenten discipline that deals with fasting - of abstaining from something - of “giving up.” Of course, our fasting is a rather paltry thing. We tend to give up things we shouldn’t be eating or doing anyway. And when you compare it to the strict fasting of Muslims and Jews, Christians are rather pitiable when it comes to fasting.

But when we read the passage from the prophecy of Isaiah that is assigned to this day, we get pulled up short. Evidently, the people of Isaiah’s day were pretty good at fasting and making a big deal about it. People who are always outward religiosity are always about the big show. “Oh, I’d love to come to dinner, but I’ll be fasting that day” - you probably have run into the type.

Isaiah challenges that whole being religious thing. He sees it as a less than authentic way of living one’s faith.

Such fasting as you do today

will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,

and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Jesus warned against outward displays of fasting and penitence. Jesus compared religious folks putting on religious airs with the hypocrites. I’m not sure that’s where we want to travel during Lent.

Instead, Isaiah gives his people a glimpse of what might be better and I think Jesus would have endorsed it too.

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?

Isaiah and Jesus seem to be saying that while God wants us to pray, wants us to fast, wants us to practice the spiritual disciplines that are a part of our faith tradition, God *also* wants us to work for justice, offer care, and practice compassion. God wants us to stand for and with those who suffer prejudice and mistreatment. God wants us to work for authentic freedom for all people - including freedom from fear. God wants us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, comfort the grieving, and bring hope to those in prisons of every kind. God wants us to be agents of reconciliation and not division.

So, the question is simply this: what will you be adding for Lent? It's not enough to give up the chocolate bar, the beer, or the television. How will you make better the lives of those around you in every kind of need? What will you do to take the love of God into lives that have become convinced that God no longer cares?

Pope Francis gives us this advice,

Do you want to fast this Lent?

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.

Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.

Fast from anger and be filled with patience.

Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.

Fast from worries and trust in God.

Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.

Fast from pressures and be prayerful.

Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.

Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.

Fast from grudges and be reconciled.

Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

What are you adding for Lent? How about this reminder:

“do justice...practice compassion, and walk humbly with God.”

For now - throughout this Lenten season - and forevermore. Amen.