Esther 4:10-17, Matthew 6:16-18

“Fasting”

We have transitioned from prayer and are now addressing fasting as we continue our series on Spiritual Disciplines. Tuesday morning at 7:30, like we will every Tuesday morning at 7:30, we gathered for prayer as a result of an action oriented result from our series on prayer. I’m encouraged, because in Florida when we started this there was only 1 other person with me the first time. We had 4. We have seen how discipline in our relationship with our Savior doesn’t produce salvation, only a personal commitment to Jesus can do that, but it does produce intensified time with our Creator.

Fasting is not a popular spiritual discipline among the Protestant faithful. We probably see fasting as the same as flagellation. Now that’s a discipline. When we livedin Italy ecery year there would be a procession that would go in front of where we lived and it would go all the way to Pompeii and every year there was a handful of the faithful who made the procession their knees. Then in Amalfi people would come out of the church in a procession and literally flagellate themselves with whips made of cord. Their clothes would be torn, their backs would be bleeding and it was quite a scene. Now, none of this is either commanded by God nor seen in Scripture as something done by the faithful, but fasting is.

We find Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna, Paul, and even our Savior himself Jesus setting the example in Scripture of those who fasted. Fasting is undisputably commanded by God, and we can point to some well respected biblical examples of fasting, including our Savior himself, but for some reason we don’t see it that way. Let’s do a little survey. How many of us can say that you pray habitually at least once a week? Probably most of you can say that. Okay, now, not to put anyone in a bit of an embarrassing situation, who fasts habitually once a week, okay, let’s just say once a month, or even once a year?

Fasting just hasn’t made our radar and for some reason it offends our Protestant sensibilities. Hopefully we will change that today and put fasting back where it belongs, on our list of disciplines and good habits that we maintain. What we will find is that fasting is a discipline that reflects our relationship not only with God, but also with those around us, our very neighbors.

**READ**

Last year ESPN had a story about a couple of NFL players and their struggle as Muslims during the days of Ramadan when fasting is required from sunup until sun down. It normally happens right in the middle of training camp and if you are fasting during then you are really putting yourself at risk to producing as the scouts want you to produce. Because of their religious convictions they fasted even if it put their livelihood at stake. Whenever I see stories like that I wonder, how are we doing as Christians?

Probably the most important aspect of fasting is that it has to go together with prayer. If we are going to keep track of important concepts that go with fasting, prayer would be one of them. If we just fast and don’t pray then it doesn’t serve its purpose. We see Daniel in his fast in prayer. We see the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles fasting, and in prayer. So for point number 1 fasting and prayer have to go together.

This is why we began our study on spiritual disciplines with prayer, because it truly is the lifeblood between us and our Savior.

A second aspect ot fasting is what we find in Jesus’ words of advice to his disciples about fasting. Again, the assumption is that they are already fasting. They don’t need a manual on how to fast because they already know how. But like all teachings we need to be reminded of the reason or the purpose, or the why of fasting. Here Jesus says fasting has to be done in secret. This is matched with prayer and giving here in these verses in Matthew. These acts of piety are between you and God. Don’t make it any more than that.

That aspect of keeping it to yourself is a bit more difficult for some than others. Stacy used to tell me in Russia that she could tell when I had been running around like crazy and forgot to eat lunch, it would happen often, because she said that I would get grumpy. Jesus says don’t be grumpy. Shave, shower, put your best clothes on. That is just between you and God.

Within these two reasons for fasting from Scripture we find in our theology a very strong advocate for fasting. John Calvin gives us 3 reasons: 1) it weakens the flesh so we don’t act wantonly, 2) it helps us to focus on prayer and 3) it reminds us of our humility before God.

These are all great reasons to fast on top of the biblical examples we saw earlier. But if last week we spoke about how prayer is able to change God’s mind, fasting has mixed results, even as it remains commanded by God. We find in II Samuel 12:20ff David fasting and praying for the child conceived in sin with Bathsheeba that God would save it. But the child dies and David recognizes that and moves on.

We also find Jesus and his disciples challenged on fasting because, well, they didn’t fast all the time like the disciples of John the Baptist. If you go to Matthew 9:14-15 Jesus’ response is, I won’t be here on earth forever so when I’m gone they will fast again. We now live in that time. Fasting is undoubtedly required of us in order to strengthen our relationship with our Savior.

But like prayer, fasting doesn’t just affect our vertical relationship with Jesus, it has to affect our horizontal interpersonal relationships with our neighbors. Turn to Isaiah 58 and what you find here is real similar to Jesus’ words in Matthew. In Esther we saw a fast that was successful for the sake of the salvation of the people of God. But here, it looks out more broadly not just to one group of people, but to all of humanity.

The prophet basically condemns the current practice of fasting as Jesus does calling them hypocrites. We complain, but God says we just serve our own interests, and we do wrong. I sthe only thing God wants from us in fasting is our humility, this one on one result, or should it extend beyond that?

Our Bible here puts a different perspective on fasting from an individual sackcloth and ashes perspective to a pursuit of justice, letting the oppressed go free, share the bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into a home on Funk Street, cover the naked.

For Isaiah the right fast has much more to do with the pursuit of social justice than the winning of a soul to strengthen our relationship with the Lord. You need to know that when I started studying for this sermon on Tuesday I did not expect to end here.

But why do you think God happened to bring along this Sunday of all Sundays a representative from MCC and our friends from Uganda Solidarity as we cover this topic of fasting, something seemingly completely unrelated. The same Sunday that we have in our home a wonderful family that we hope to help. What does fasting have to do with any of this?

Apparently to Isaiah, this is fasting. The language of righting the wrongs in society is the reason why I do what I do, it is what makes me the most excited to be in this business, and I’m going to say it, what makes me excited to be a Presbyterian. We get so very upset about the moral degradation of society especially in issues of right to life and homosexuality, the prophet is even more upset about issues that are not only mentioned in Scripture but continue today.

Here at First Presbyterian I am absolutely convinced that if we refocus our ministry on these issues then those of us who stand on opposite sides of societal hot button issues but worship together on Sundays, can then during the week work together as we have over these past two years. There are plenty of windmills to chase if we want to, why not purpose the fast that is acceptable to the Lord?

I have a confession, I have not found my niche yet in this area of social ministry. It is taking me some time. I love the work that we are doing, the internal work that is creating a lot of buzz. We have relaunched the New Beginnings House, but there is so much more we can do. But if our energies are diverted elsewhere, to issues that are not called out by the prophet, or by Jesus, then we are in danger of falling in step with society and pursuing that which is not a correct fast. As the prophet Joel states we could be accused of rending our clothes instead of our hearts. Our actions don’t always reflect that rending as it ought. The prophet Micah in 6:8 tells us: He has told you

We are going to do that. When we finished our series on prayer we set up weekly time when anyone can come here to the sanctuary and pray. Quietly, humbly, not for others to see, but just to gather as a family. We will do the same for fasting. Every Maundy Thursday we take communion together as our Savior does. I am calling a fast for that Thursday and we will break it together with communion.

The fast is for the purpose of discerning God’s will for this church as we look to relaunch our social ministries. Amen.