

“We Empty Ourselves”

Isaiah 58:1-9a

Now that I’m an old man, well into my 60’s, I have an annual every January appointment with who I call my “gout doctor”, but who also treats arthritis in my knees and shoulders. Each January, he reminds me how much weight I’ve gained over the past year, and along with my cardiologist who I see every 6 months, tells me I need to lose weight. I remind them that I’m on the “church diet” and work out 3 mornings a week. They shake their heads knowing what the church diet consists of.

I think back to when I was in college drinking weight gain formula everyday mixed into a shake, struggling to keep my weight at 235 for football. Now I weigh in at 250 with no struggle at all.

While I was sitting in the waiting room last January, I began reading a special Health edition of Time magazine that had an article about the advantages of fasting.

With the beginning of Lent last Wednesday, this is the time when Christians at least talk about fasting. For Christians, fasting is no doubt the most neglected spiritual discipline. We know it’s a good thing to do both for our spiritual life and our health.

I share with you two paragraphs from the article about how fasting can affect our physical health and then we’ll look at what the Bible says about fasting . . .

The practice of intermittent fasting is one of the latest health trends practiced by people looking to lose weight and increase well-being. In fact, short-term fasting on a regular basis (a couple of times a week) seems to actually change your body in a lot of positive ways.

It increases human growth hormone, for example, which contributes to both weight loss and muscle gain. It improves insulin levels, repairs cells and fights the process of aging. Improvements in heart health and in the body's ability to fight cancer have also been noted. Of course, there's the obvious correlation that eating less means losing weight — really the simplest diet plan ever.

The kind of intermittent fasting that is recommended isn't necessarily the arduous, multi-day fast that many would quickly dismiss as just too hard. It can be as simple as the "16:8 Method," which involves restricting food intake to only an 8-hour period of the day (like 1 p.m. to 9 p.m.) while fasting for the other 16 hours. A 24-hour fast once or twice a week is another alternative, as is the "Eat-Stop-Eat" method, which involves only eating 500-600 calories one to two days a week. Anyone deciding to engage in this kind of intermittent fasting should always check with his or her doctor first, for sure.

While that kind of fasting can generate a lot of health benefits, in the Bible, our physical health isn't the point of fasting. It might be an upside, but the real purpose of biblical fasting is about focusing on one's spiritual condition and, by extension, on the spiritual and physical needs of the world around us. Fasting is prescribed throughout the Scriptures as the preparatory approach to seeking God's best for us and for the world.

Outside the Bible, the practice of fasting wasn't a concern for most people in the ancient Near East. Examples of fasting throughout the Bible reveal a whole range of purposes:

- fasting in times of grief (1 Samuel 31:13),

- fasting during periods of repentance (1 Samuel 7:6), and
- fasting while seeking deliverance from one's enemies (2 Chronicles 20:3-4).

Jesus famously fasted for 40 days, seeking the Father's guidance and fighting off temptation to go his own way before entering into his public ministry (Matthew 4:1-11). The principle of biblical fasting is that the importance of one's request of God or relationship with God causes one to be so concerned about his or her spiritual condition that physical needs fade into the background. If intermittent fasting *is about conditioning the body*, *biblical fasting is about conditioning the soul* to be oriented to God.

God wants to orient us toward the needs of others, and that's the basis for Isaiah 58:1-9, our text for today.

As the chapter begins, God is critiquing the fasting practice of the people of God. Like a lot of spiritual disciplines, fasting can be appropriated for the wrong reasons or simply become a rote repetition of a discipline without actually thinking about the purpose. God was about to "announce to the house of Jacob their sins," which included the hypocrisy of seeking God through fasting while still disobeying him (v. 1). They acted "as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God," fasting so that they may "ask of [God] righteous judgments" (v. 2). And yet they wondered why, with all that fasting, God did not "see" their plight; they had "humbled" themselves, but God did not "notice" (v. 3). So why humble ourselves?

Intermittent fasting, from a health perspective, is about auditing our bodies, while spiritual fasting is about auditing our souls. That's what God's people failed to do. They engaged in the required practice but did so without grasping the intended purpose.

Jesus would say something similar about the "hypocrites" who fasted and let everyone know that they were doing so by looking "dismal" and disfiguring their faces, while their own souls continued to rebel against God. For Jesus, fasting was about getting right with God in "secret" rather than putting on a show in public (Matthew 6:16-18).

Through Isaiah, God similarly admonished the people for serving their own interests on fast days while, at the same time, oppressing their workers, quarrelling and fighting among themselves (vv. 3-4). "Such fasting as you do today," says God, "will not make your voice heard on high" (v. 4). The people might humble themselves externally, their rumbling stomachs sounding like pious "amens," but without their spirits being emptied of self-interest for their fasting to make any difference to God (v. 5).

Again, real fasting isn't about simply putting on a religious show or losing a few pounds. It's about aligning ourselves with God and God's purposes. Real fasting helps us to recognize our own needs and the needs of others, turning us toward the things that matter to God: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke" (v. 6). It's not about *merely abstaining from food but sharing it with the hungry*, providing hospitality to the poor, clothing the naked, and not ducking the needs of one's neighbors (v. 7).

In the kind of fasting God is looking for in Isaiah 58, we *empty ourselves so that the needs of others might be filled*. Imagine the difference that would be made for God's kingdom if, for example, we took the money we save on buying food during intermittent fasting and contributed it to our food pantry to serve those who are truly hungry. What if the time we would normally spend preparing meals, we spent the first Sunday of the month serving those who were in need at the Redeemer Crisis Center a nice meal? And what if we did so without announcing it piously to the world? That's the kind of fasting that aligns us with God and God's purposes. We put the brakes on our own perceived needs and focus on what God needs from us.

Proponents of intermittent fasting say that it's not so much a diet *plan* as it is a *pattern* of eating. Diet plans come and go, with every fad purporting short-term losses. God's fasting plan, however, is more of a life pattern. It's an invitation to not only audit our patterns of eating but our patterns of consumption in general; to look not only at how we use food but how we use money, time, energy, experience. It's about paring down and reorienting the way we do life, which isn't just a practice for Lent.

The real upside of this kind of fasting is that not only does it help others break free from the "yoke" of oppression, it frees us as well. In a consumer culture, we tend to become prisoners of those things that we consume, be it food, material things or entertainment. They exert a certain hold over us, causing us to believe that we couldn't possibly go without them for any length of time. The truth, is that when we hold things loosely, when we are more generous with our food, our hospitality and our time, we tend to feel ourselves liberated as well.

As God says through Isaiah, “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 be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places” (vv. 10-11).

4 Weeks 4 Love was our February theme when we collected everything from laundry detergent and deodorant to men’s underwear and jars of peanut butter for the LMM men’s shelter and the Redeemer Crisis Center.

Love One Another Sunday, today, the first Sunday of every month, we collect non-perishable food for our Divinity pantry. And next Sunday, we collect diapers and other baby items for the second annual Diaper Drive in memory of baby Harrison Schiffer.

When we empty ourselves, Isaiah prophecies in verse 8 . . . ⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

May the peace of God . . .

#319 – O Lord, Throughout These Forty Days