

Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When you fast, not IF you fast, says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. And we all love the Sermon on the Mount, the “good teachings of Jesus that no one reads, and fewer follow” section of Matthew. And why don’t we read it? Because it shows us that Jesus isn’t our mister lovey dovey, always approachable, always willing to overlook everything friend, but that He comes with strong, harsh words, with rules and commands impossible to follow, and with little room for niceties and friendly clichés.

I suppose one could say that the Beatitudes are “nice”, but only until Jesus starts saying things like “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” or demands of us that we keep every dot and tittle of the law without relaxing or wavering.

Jesus seems like a big legalist when He says, “do not do as the hypocrites” or “when you pray, when you give, when you fast,” verses “if”. I mean we can get on board with “if”, but “when” is a bit demanding, don’t you think? And to be called a hypocrite by Jesus should we think otherwise...well “that can’t be a right interpretation...” “God is love,” after all, which means that we should be able to do and say and live our lives in any fashion we want without interference from some legalist.

And it’s not so much about the praying and giving. We can get behind Jesus on these things. But that whole “fasting” thing...that’s what the Catholics do on Fridays, right, when they gorge on fried fish. Fasting is so physical; what does it have to do with my spiritual life with Jesus?

What does what I put in my mouth and digest with my insides have to do with my spiritualism and my salvation and my prayer and my giving? But..." when you fast...."

Later in Matthew's account of the Gospel, when the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus to ask why they fasted and the Pharisees fasted, but Jesus' disciples did not fast, Jesus answered, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (9:15). Then they will fast. After Jesus the Bridegroom is taken away. Like now. "When you fast," Jesus said.

What IS fasting? Well let me first say that fasting isn't just about food – at least not Christian fasting. Fasting DOES involve hunger, but not necessarily of the stomach. It involves giving up something, but not necessarily your favorite combo meal at Hardee's or Dairy Queen or putting down that can of pop. Yes, these can all be fasting too, but a simple changing of your diet isn't necessarily fasting. And in fact, doing it for reasons other than how Jesus describes is hypocritical.

So, what DOES fasting, no matter how it might look, what does it have to do with being a Christian?

Well a couple of things you must understand:

Now for those of you who are turned off from me bringing up Greek, bear with me, you need to know this and understand, or you will trip up over Jesus' words over and over again.

In the Greek the phrase "when you," followed by give or pray or fast, is "Ὅταν οὖν ποιῆς. And the interesting thing about this phrase is that it is NOT a command. Is subjunctive, which implies an assumed action, something that Jesus assumed the 12 would be doing.

See, fasting, even up well beyond the time of Luther, was a normal act of piety and devotion in the Church. The uncomfortableness of an empty stomach was normal. But it isn't comfortable at all for modern society who have turned food into an artform rather than a necessary evil. So, Jesus, assuming that the disciples were going to fast because it was a normal part of life, and that they would pray and give because they were normal parts of life, tells them, "when you do this," now here comes the command, "do not be like the hypocrites." This is very much a command, so much so, that it would be better that we don't give or don't pray or don't fast than to do it for hypocritical reasons. Right?

Now let's switch gears. The theme for these 40 days is "Behold the man!" Let's tie this in. "Behold the man!"; Jesus, the God-man.

Pontius Pilate had it right when he shouted to the crowd concerning the bloody, beaten, broken, nearly naked Jesus standing before him in the governor's court: "Behold the man!"

For in Jesus, God is man. Jesus is flesh, Jesus is your brother. Behold, skin and bones, blood, hair, heart, lungs, spit. He walks and sleeps and eats and prays and He bleeds. He suffers and He dies. He rises again and He ascends, and He will return. Fully, a completely human being but fully, completely God. Did you know? God has DNA now and fingerprints. Behold, the man – Jesus.

But there is something different. He has no sin. His nature is perfect, His human nature undefiled. He is exactly as Adam was meant to be. But because of Adam we are defiled, we are imperfect, we are sinful. When compared to the perfect humanity of Jesus we aren't even human; we are something lower and baser.

Yes, Jesus was tempted like we all are tempted, but He prevailed, He did not fall. We get a big juicy porterhouse steak thrown in front of us

and we start to drool and dribble all over the place. We get tempted by the sins of lust and greed and we fall in headlong and we don't look back. But not Jesus. He went 40 days without a bite to eat and without a complaint on his lips. He walked headlong toward pain and suffering and didn't seek out a doctor to give him morphine or a psychiatrist to comfort Him in His journey. He is truly human, the way God desired of all humanity. And even death could not keep him down. And it is His sole desire to give you everything that He is.

For God, eating anything for any amount of time was unnatural. But "behold the man," Jesus had to eat, but for you he fasted. He fasted so his disciples could feast while the bridegroom was present. He fasted so that you could feast every Sunday that we receive His body and blood. And He fasted so that on the Last Day you can feast to your heart's content on the delicious food of paradise and eternal life.

During the season of Lent, we fast. We may choose to fast on certain foods or shut off the TV or whatever the case may be. We do it, not to look good or to feel good about ourselves, but we do it, so that we can fill that time with God, church, Scripture, and learn to be faithful.

But we also fast on other things. During Lent our joy is subdued, we put away the "Alleluias". You notice that the Paschal candle or "Christ candle" is no where to be seen. We don't sing the hymns of praise and excitement that we normally sing throughout the rest of the year.

And in all of this, we are fasting so that we learn and experience what it was like for Jesus to suffer for us, to give up heaven for us, to become as one of us, for us, and to die for us.

We fast this season, yes, to train and discipline and subdue our human nature but more importantly, we fast this season to train and edify and build up our faith. We learn to appreciate the things we are without and we learn to celebrate the gifts we have been given.

Fasting keeps us from becoming too spiritual, too emotional, too experiential. It draws us to recognize that we are human, carnal, flesh and body creatures and this humbles us. It draws us to see that Jesus is flesh and blood and that He isn't some spiritual idea or philosophical assertion, but a real human being who does not sin. The whole "I'm not religious, I just love the Lord": Lent and fasting forces us to pull back a bit and admit to ourselves and to God that "maybe I'm a little more religious than I think and maybe I don't love the Lord nearly as much as I say."

The season of Lent, fasting, it draws us to humbly and honestly look at ourselves in the mirror of God's holy and perfect law and see that, no matter what platitudes or clichés we use, we are not all that we hypocritically believe we are.

See, God isn't all about spiritualism and experientialism. He's not all about "cloud-9 experiences" – all of this is carnal, sinful-nature stuff. For Jesus is truly human, perfectly human, and He is the incarnation of God in just the way God wanted it. We can't use our bodies perfectly, we can't think perfectly, we can't feel perfectly...but Jesus did all things perfectly. Trust in HIS Spirit; trust in HIS flesh and blood. Behold the man!

And see the heavenly food He gives at His altar – the body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine, and break your fast. Come and gorge on the heavenly food and drink of salvation because it is perfect food and perfect drink, the perfect flesh and blood of Jesus entering into our imperfect bodies and making us whole – behold the man.

Amen.