

Smashing Idols: "Foodolatry"
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The United Church of Gainesville

Isaiah 58:3-12; Matthew 6: 16-18; 9:14-15

Here's a smashing idols story for you. The medieval Catholic Church had developed a rather sophisticated discipline of fasting for both clergy and laity. One of the early reformers, Ulrich Zwingli, whom we can count as one of the patriarchs of our own Protestant reformed tradition, felt so strongly that fasting had become such an external, superficial means of gaining salvation for Catholics that he made a public display of regularly eating sausage during lent. That's some of the silliness of the reformation.

There was a huge Protestant/Catholic divide in my home town of River Edge, New Jersey, and we divided up religious identities according to who could and could not eat meat on Fridays. Because they ate fish on Fridays, we called Catholics mackerel snappers. I had good friends who were Catholics. We ate together on Fridays, and they ate fish. I don't think I felt or expressed any respect or understanding for their discipline.

I find it interesting that just like Sandy's first sermon of this theme of "Smashing Idols" which dealt with the Protestant over reaction to Catholicism's veneration of Saints, I'm addressing Protestantism's overreaction to fasting.

Food, like sex, in and of itself, is not a sin. Nor in and of itself, is it a sacred virtue. It is, however, like sex, a high order value, which in the service of other values increases their power for good or evil. Combine food with gross self-gratification and you get gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins. On the other hand, combine food with sharing, remembrance, and mystical connection and you get communion, our most sacred ritual, a celebration of a good and blessed meal. Family meals probably include some of our best and worst memories, again indicating how food makes good times better and bad times worse.

Some of the great battle lines in families and friendships are drawn between the three great religions - vegans, vegetarians, and meat eaters. Then there are the many denominations of those who eat local, organic, free range, no red meat, charcoal but not gas barbecue, gas but not charcoal barbecue, or just plain anything goes. Disorders of both over and under eating are life threatening syndromes, yet we often feel powerless before them.

In this context talking about fasting is entering a minefield. Fasting is a fascinating spiritual discipline that often winds up at the center of religious division. Jesus tells his disciples not to make a big show of it when they fast, like the religious authorities who loved to display the agonies of their fasts. When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus why the Pharisees fasted but his disciples

did not, Jesus said, "Do the wedding guests fast when the bridegroom is present?"

In one of those "You just can't win" moments when Jesus was being criticized for his eating habits from both sides, he said, "John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking and they said, 'He has a demon.' I come eating and drinking and they say, 'Look a glutton and a drunkard.'"

Most of Jesus' statements about fasting seem to be negative, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report that he fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness immediately after his baptism.

Just before Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments only to encounter the Israelites dancing around their golden calf, the first big idol to be smashed, he had fasted for forty days and forty nights.

Here's an interesting bit of information I was not aware of. Mormons are encouraged to fast for two meals the first Sunday of each month and contribute money they would have spent on food for resources for the poor and the hungry. The late president of the Mormon Church, Gordon Hinckley, Jr. once said, "If the principle of the fast day was followed throughout the world, the hungry would be fed, the naked clothed, and the homeless sheltered." I don't know if that is actually true, but it's statistically close.

I recently met with one of the Action Network Board members, Pastor George Dix of the dynamic African American Passage Family Church in Gainesville. This church, by the way, recently donated \$100,000 to the Alachua County School board for quality after school enrichment programs. I asked him about the discipline of fasting I heard he follows. He invites his whole congregation to join him on the first week of each month to fast from midnight to 3:00 on Tuesday, from midnight to 6:00 on Wednesday, and midnight to 9:00 on Thursday. It's a very impressive spiritual discipline.

We have all become aware of the Muslim practice of fasting from dawn to sunset for the month of Ramadan.

Virtually all native and indigenous religions include fasting in their rituals of coming of age and seeking direction for their lives.

Going on a hunger strike has long been a form of non-violent protest for those who have no other way of resisting the dominant powers. Mahatma Gandhi went on frequent hunger strikes to protest British occupation of India. In 1981 Bobby Sands a member of the British Parliament from Northern Ireland died after a sixty six day hunger strike protesting the condition of Catholic Irish prisoners in British jails. 100,000 people attended his funeral.

In 2005 up to 200 detainees at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba engaged in hunger strikes, protesting their three and a half years of imprisonment with no release in sight, as well as constant beatings by guards. When they were at risk of dying, they were taken to the prison hospital and force fed through nasal feeding tubes.

The first time I ever fasted was at Yale Divinity School, when I participated in three days of fasting and prayer in protest of the war in Vietnam.

Imagine my surprise when Lyndon Johnson didn't end that war because 100 Divinity students were fasting.

My second fast was in 1978, again a three day fast to protest the reinstatement of the death penalty with the impending execution of John Spenkelink at Florida State Prison.

After my early fasts, Bud Ogle, one of my social justice mentors from Yale, came to visit us here in Gainesville. I told him that I was finding fasting basically irritating and not very productive. He surprised me a little by asking, "Are you fasting and praying?" I had to admit that to the praying... not so much.

Which brings me to Isaiah chapter 58, one of the all time great biblical passages on fasting. I think it characterizes quite clearly the difference between fasting as a kind of idolatry and as a practice of spirituality and social justice. The people of Israel ask why they should bother fasting if God doesn't seem to notice and nothing they pray for happens.

The question sends God into something of a divine tantrum, which should help us understand our own rants, given that we are said to be created in the image of God.

Listen to this one:

"Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is this 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?"

God, we see, hates melodrama.

Then God, through Isaiah, shares one of the great orations of all times on what true fasting is about.

"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?

You shall cry for help and I will say, 'Here I am.'

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

And your healing shall spring up quickly...

If you remove the yoke from among you,

The pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

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 noonday...

(When you fast this way)

You shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your people will rebuild what has long been in ruins, building again on the old foundations. You will be known as the people who rebuilt the walls, who restored the ruined houses.”

This is prophetic preaching at its best.

We began our practice of a one day fast for Oxfam here at UCG in 1979. Our first Oxfam meal to break the fast consisted of about twelve people in a 10x16’ room upstairs in the corner of what is now the youth school room. According to that annual report, we raised \$900.

At our peak in 2005 we had a little over 120 people participating in our fast and we raised \$2500. We have drifted down to under 100 people contributing about \$1,900 last year. That was certainly quite good, but this year we are challenging ourselves to renew our commitment to fasting and to Oxfam. Our Compassion in Action Committee has a goal of 150 people participating in this year’s fast. I think we can do 200.

I have one caveat for teenagers before I launch into my challenge. You are so active. Your bodies burn up lots of energy, and there is such danger of eating disorders, especially among teenage girls, that I really don’t want to see you teenagers give up full meals. Develop your own healthy fast. Cut out snacks, junk food, etc., but do not use this fast as an excuse for abuse of your own body.

The same is true for any adults for whom fasting is a health risk.

Yet I believe that all of us can find a way to fast and pray and participate in the Oxfam fast this year at a meaningful level. It need not be a full fast. I simply challenge all of you to find your own level of fasting so you can be part of this communal, spiritual, caring practice.

Most of us can stand to give up a significant amount of food for twenty-four hours and do the world, our bodies, and our spirits a Mitzvah, an act of blessing.

Anything we idolize separates us from the truest and holiest elements of who we are, and food is an easy idol to spot once we remove even a little of it from our lives. Pay attention to what you learn about your relationship to food when you don’t have it, and add that learning to your spiritual journey.

As I fast, I have to remind myself to pray. I encourage you as well to take time when you would have been eating not just to do more work or run more errands, but also to have some holy silence.

Today we have this opportunity through Oxfam, one of the best organizations for grass roots hunger relief around the world, to do justice with the money we save from not buying three full meals.

There is seldom such an available and concrete way to respond to God’s call to be a new being as to participate in this one day fast and come to the table together for a meal to break the fast.

I believe that God is offering us this unique opportunity at UCG today, to smash the idol of food to participate in a universal, archetypal spiritual practice

that resonates through all faiths which will also alleviate some of the suffering our sisters and brothers endure in this world. You will not only restore some of the ruined foundations of the human community, but in so doing you will be restored as well.

So ask yourself, are you going to fast? If not, ask yourself why. Go ahead and list your reasons. Are those reasons small idols that separate you from the greater goals of your life? Are you willing to smash them?

In closing, I ask you to hear these words of the poet James Broughton once again.

"Forsake your devotion to predicament and discord.

Break the tradition of rivalry and curse.

Quick, while there's time, uproot hostility.

Claim your humanity, insist on true community.

Open your fists into embraces.

Open your arms' length into loving circles.

Remove every roadblock to the peaceable kingdom.

Outnumber the hawks. Outdistance the angels."

Prayer –

I invite you into two minutes of silent prayer. Make yourself ready for this silence by sitting up straight, putting both feet on the ground, and place your hands in a position of openness. Breathe deeply and feel the Holy Spirit enter your being. You may close your eyes, look at the window, or focus on an object in this room that is sacred to you. In the silence listen for the call of God in this moment in your life, and how you will respond, "Here I am." I will ring the bell to close our prayer.