

Ash Wednesday + March 6, 2019

For several years my wife and I hosted a Boxing Day Party on the Feast of St. Stephen, the second day of Christmas. When we invited a few folks the first year they all showed up! Then the next year there were more, and each year saw more and more folks responding positively. Who wouldn't want to gather for a feast of rich food and free flowing wine? One year there was wall-to-wall people and scarcely any room for folks to walk around.

Chances are, if you throw a party, people will show up.

What would happen, though, if you were to do something entirely different like hosted a fast? Invite folks over not for food and drink but to wear sackcloth and hand out ashes. Instead of jokes and funny stories, folks would engage in lament and mourning. Chances are no one would respond to the invitation and your friends and neighbors might think you are mad.

A feast? Sure! A fast? Maybe I'll take a raincheck.

Isn't this what makes the church a little strange and different and out of sync with the culture around us? To be sure, we like to throw parties and feasts. I can guarantee you that this space will be overflowing with people on Easter. The church, though, insists that great feasts must be preceded by intentional fasts. Easter is so important and so central to our shared life and mission that without a period of preparation the power of it might be diminished. So, we Christian folks enter this rhythm of fasting and feasting. By putting our whole selves in this rhythm – body, mind, and spirit – we enter the very heartbeat of God.

IN our culture of consumerism that says we must acquire more and more, the notion of fasting or living with less or giving something up may seem a little strange and if we've been taught to always wear a happy face, any notion of wearing ashes seems strange.

But, that's okay. This is what we do. This is who we are. God summons us today to begin our annual fast. So, we enter preparing for the Easter feast by praying, fasting, giving to the poor, and engaging in acts of mercy, love, and generosity.

Giving something up for Lent can, of course, be self-serving. Jesus exposes these dangers – fasten to disfigure our faces, praying to be seen by others, giving alms to show others how wonderful we are. We might even trick ourselves into believing that such things will earn us favor with God. Please know that the Lenten disciplines beg us to shed such self-righteous notions and they promise something far more life-giving: to enter a deeper relationship with God, one another, and our neighbor, especially the neighbor in need. And far from being merely private, the fast to which we are summoned is public. That may, in fact, provide a powerful witness to the world.

You may recall 2001 and the days following 9/11 when the twin towers collapsed in New York City. People streamed to church. I was in Portland at the time and I recall the Sunday following 9/11 saw record attendance. What I noticed then is something I continue to believe – that there is a deep longing for mourning and wailing in our nation. The momentum was there at that time, but it didn't seem to last. When we fail to grieve our pain gets channeled into anger and behavior that finds us hurting ourselves and others.

A public fast for communal lament and mourning seems odd but that's one of the ancient meanings of the fast. I know someone who entered a 12 day fast following the death of someone he loved very much. It has great biblical precedence.

Another ancient meaning of the fast is that since it is a time of lament, a response to suffering and affliction it may function as a form of protests injustice and evil.

I recently learned about a group of Quaker women who, in 1917, lobbied congress for the women's right to vote. They travelled to the nation's capital. There they were arrested and beaten and as a protest they staged a hunger strike while in prison. Not unlike Gandhi who fasted to protests British colonialism or Cesar Chavez who fasted on behalf of migrant workers whose rights were being ignored.

When the prophet Joel declares a fast for the people to gather in mourning the prophet summoned the people to do this in the face of disaster or crisis. Locusts were destroying the crops and wreaking havoc on the well-being of the community. By calling the people together the prophet begged the people to lean on God, the true source of life and blessing.

At first glance practices such as these may seem arcane or “out of touch” but I wonder if they aren't some of the most faithful ways we might engage in resistance to injustice and evil and faithful ways to engage God when there is grief or loss. In a culture that denies death and is ensconced in overconsumption and consumerism, we are free to practice a different way.

Isaiah puts it this way (Isaiah 58): *Is not the fast I choose to lose 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 see the naked, to cover them...?*

You see, our annual fast is inextricably linked to God's call for justice and love of neighbor. No, spiritual practices do not get God to love us more. God never stops loving us. The intent is for us to mine even deeper the great treasure of God's love and to draw ever closer to a world aching in pain and in need.

Enter the fast God has chosen for us and revel in the all reconciling love of Jesus Christ. With Joel let us say return to God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Not a bad way to get ready for Easter. Amen.