

# “Fasting”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 28, 2024*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 103:6-13

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 2:18-22

## *Introduction*

One of the themes of the gospels – and it is maybe most notable in Mark’s gospel – is that Jesus’s proclamation of God’s good news is not always well-received. In this second chapter of Mark, questions begin to arise from those watching and listening to Jesus, asking, *why does he speak this way? Why does he eat with those kinds of people? And, why do his followers not fast?*

I used to be able to teach about today’s passage and say, with some confidence, that hardly anyone fasts these days. But with weight loss and better health programs promoting things like intermittent fasting and 14-day cleansing diets, more and more people are testing out this ancient practice.

But, as we’ll come to see, fasting – like any physical or spiritual discipline – is not just a matter of what to do, but more importantly, why; what reasons stand behind the choice to act out what we believe to be important, vital, and life-giving about Jesus?

## *Read Mark 2:18-22*

In his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard asserts that we become like Christ by following the style of life that Jesus chose for himself. In other words, disciplines – or spiritual practices – are a means to the grace and the gifts of God.<sup>1</sup>

Willard goes on to describe two different types of spiritual practices: 1) the disciplines of engagement, such as prayer, study, service and fellowship; and 2) the disciplines of abstinence, things like solitude, frugality, and fasting. Each of these disciplines can be traced back to Jesus and his earliest followers: they are elements of the kind of life Jesus modeled and taught.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, p. 156

Last Sunday, we looked at the verses immediately preceding today's passage from Mark, chapter two. In it, we see Jesus at the home of Levi, the tax collector; eating and drinking with – as the scribes of the Pharisees describe the gathered crowd – sinners and tax collectors. Here, we see Christ engaged in the spiritual practice of fellowship and radical hospitality, reaching across the boundaries that divided Jew and Gentile, clean and unclean, to include those who – by their own destructive or immoral choices – were considered unwelcome.

Now, the question is posed – by whom we are not exactly sure – why John's disciples and the Pharisees practice fasting, but the disciples of Jesus do not. What seems to be implied is that fasting – this ancient means of showing contrition, humility, and reverence to God; as well as solidarity with those suffering from food insecurity – is a necessary discipline. Even today, Jews fast on *Yom Kippur* – the Day of Atonement – as they gather in synagogues to practice repentance together.

In some Christian traditions, the practice of fasting – especially during the season of Lent – is encouraged or mandated. Abstinence from eating – or from eating certain foods – represents an act of solidarity with Christ who suffered for our transgressions and the sins of all.

We don't know all the practices of the followers of John the Baptizer, but we know, from the gospels, something about his ethic. Calling the people into the wilderness to the Jordan – that river in Judea – for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, John said to the crowds, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To the tax collectors, John said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And he instructed soldiers, saying, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:11-14) And as his reward for these proclamations of good news, John was locked away in prison.

The Pharisees were considered scrupulous keepers of the Torah and the standard bearers of righteousness. Concerned to preserve the Jewish faith and way of life in the midst of Roman occupation, the Pharisees took seriously God's call on Israel to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:6) They sought to renew faith by applying biblical laws about ritual purity to all Jews and in all aspects of life, with special attention to dietary laws and Sabbath observance.<sup>2</sup>

While the scribes and Pharisees valued and engaged in debate over interpretation of the law, their opinions were formed based on the weight of precedent and tradition. Jesus troubles them because he speaks and acts on his own authority, without deference to tradition. He appears dismissive, even cavalier, about law observance. They view him as a threat to religious and social order.

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Thus, for these various reasons – and as disciplines of engagement and abstinence – the disciples of John and the Pharisees practice fasting. That was the tradition, the accepted norm. The disciples of Jesus – upon his instruction and authority – practiced differently. We can see why this difference of opinion and action could have caused tension.

Jesus's initial explanation is also one we can probably understand. There may well be appropriate times for fasting – as a sign of contrition and repentance – but a wedding is not such an occasion. The bridegroom – the one who, in ancient tradition, provides the feast – might be offended by guests unwilling to share in their joy. Fasting can wait, Jesus says, until that day when the bridegroom is no longer with them.

It is easy to take Jesus's side and dismiss the concerns of his questioners for feeling that Jesus is playing fast and loose with the tradition. Regulations about the law were – and are – the very fabric of Judaism. The Pharisees, like other conservatives, believed that God had given the laws as a means of carving out a sphere of holiness and righteousness on earth – God's very presence, they believed, depended on ritual observance.

There's no denying that Jesus's words and actions pose a threat to the established order. He subverts the expectations of all those he encounters: the clean and unclean, welcome and unwelcome, sick and well. To be with Jesus – who heals bodies of disease and offers a message of repentance to sinners – is a time to celebrate; it is an occasion for feasting, not fasting. It is like being at a wedding, where differences of opinion and practice are bridged, and new relationships are created.<sup>3</sup>

If to be with Jesus is to have the joy that one would experience at a wedding, is that same kind of feeling to be found in our spiritual disciplines? When we pattern the practices of our lives after the words and example of Christ, do we experience such fulfillment, peace, and joy?

Jesus is not done answering this question about fasting. What his two mysterious, not-clearly-connected follow-up sayings – about clothing repair and winemaking – make clear is that one of the primary issues at stake is the relationship between old and new, past and future, time-honored ways and uncharted territory. Notice, though, that these little parables about the cloak with holes and seasoned wineskins do not make value judgments. They do not suggest that old things are bad and new things are good, and that traditions (such as, perhaps, the things these first-century Jews do) should be scrapped in favor of shiny new practices (like, perhaps, the things that Christians do).

In fact, according to verse 21, the old cloak will be repaired. The vintage object has value. And while the old wineskin in verse 22 doesn't seem optimal, it – along with

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<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner's Guide to the Good News*, p. 17-18

the new wine – is to be preserved and not destroyed. Likewise, when speaking about the bridegroom and wedding banquet, Jesus does not reject the practice of fasting out of hand. It, too, is given its proper time and purpose.

This being the case, it is inappropriate for Christian communities to examine how and when spiritual disciplines or traditions are abandoned for being labeled as “old wineskins.” There may, indeed, be good reasons that a practice or prayer or congregational song is no longer fitting or faithful, but that is a different question. The point made here is this: inherited things are not necessarily bad things just because they are old, used, or worn. Rather, Jesus acknowledges that the old and new ways – when brought together without proper thought or care – can be mutually destructive, creating spoilage and pulling apart.<sup>4</sup>

This seems to happen in faith communities when the focus on fasting overshadows the call to feasting. Put another way, when we fail to openly welcome and accept those with different or unfamiliar spiritual practices, it erects barriers rather than tearing them down. In the history of the Christian church, how to baptize, who is invited to take communion, what type of music is holy, and even how we design our places of worship have caused schism and divide. We are tempted to believe that our practices – whether ancient or innovative – are right and other ways are flawed or less than.

Even as, in Mark’s gospels, they learn to follow the teachings and actions of Jesus, the disciples do not always understand what Jesus is calling them to be and do. “Do you still not perceive and understand?” he asks them in chapter eight. “Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember?” (Mark 8:17-18)

Balancing the old and the new, change in the midst of tradition, is not easy to do. The most ancient practices can still be rich; they should not be thrown out based on age alone. And yet, Jesus seems to be challenging us – as he did with his contemporary followers – to pay close attention to not only how we do spiritual disciplines – whether outwardly engaging with our community or inwardly abstaining from the world’s excesses – but, also, for what reasons; to ask not just *what*, but *why*.

Thus – feasting or fasting, reaching out or examining within – we practice our faith with mindfulness and care; paying attention to the ways that our Christian tradition both guides and challenges us to better understand what Jesus calls us to do and to be. Thanks be to God for these varied spiritual disciplines which provide to us a means to the grace and the gifts of God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Angela Hancock from *WorkingPreacher.com*