

Homily – Fasting the Middle Way

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The desert fathers and mothers were Christians who lived in the deserts of Egypt. Seventeen hundred years ago, in the third century, the busyness of the cities of the Roman Empire caused some to seek a simpler life.

In general, each desert father or mother lived alone, as a hermit, or in small groups. They spent large parts of their day in prayer. The desert fathers and mothers had the reputation of being wise holy ones, for they did a lot of interior work, that we can still learn from today.

Curiously, when the hermits left their towns and dwelled in their desert caves, cells, or temporary shelters, they found that their physical environment intensified not only their desire for God but also their drag into sin. They couldn't sustain their resolve. One would think that leaving family, possessions, and occupations would free the body, mind, and soul for prayer. But this was not the case. You know what it is like when you all of a sudden are in the midst of silence, stillness, and solitude. In the midst of the quiet the fretting and ruminating take over. You start to think about all of the things you wish were different in life or you think about your unmet desires. This is what happened to the desert fathers and mothers when they left civilization behind. They descended into the pit of their own vices. Therefore, as an antidote, these wise men and women took up a new inner work to understand and manage their thoughts. This inner work moved them well along in their spiritual journey with God.

And, a tradition developed in the third and fourth centuries for people to seek out a desert father or mother when one had a particularly vexing or perplexing question about life. The desert fathers and mothers would impart wisdom to the seeker.

John Cassian was a fifth century Christian theologian who gathered together many of the learning of the desert fathers and mothers. He found that the desert fathers and mothers had discovered eight categories or themes for the thoughts that seemed to afflict the people who came to them for wisdom.

The eight afflictions or themes are food, sex, things, anger, dejection, acedia, vainglory, and pride. And, these eight afflictions can be put into three groupings. The first three, food, sex, and things, are afflictions of the body. The next two, anger and dejection, are afflictions of the mind. And, the last three, acedia, vainglory, and pride, are afflictions of the soul.

Most of these eight are pretty self-explanatory. But, the last three, the afflictions of the soul are not. So, let me briefly explain these three. Acedia is a state of listlessness or torpor in which one just stops caring. It is related to depression and is also related to apathy, ennui, and boredom. Vainglory is the seeking of something good but for bad reasons. And here, pride is defined as seeking something bad for bad reasons.

Again, food, sex, things, anger, dejection, acedia, vainglory and pride are the eight categories of thought identified by the ancient desert fathers and mothers, thoughts that get in the way of a healthy spiritual journey. And, they always put food first, since food is considered the base or foundational need.

Now, in the Bible we see that Jesus enjoyed eating and drinking. His first miracle at the wedding in Cana was about water and wine. The feeding of the five thousand is one of his other miracles. Jesus is shown enjoying meals with his friends and followers. And, Jesus taught that what goes into the mouth is not as important as what comes out of it. Jesus didn't seem to have any restrictions about food and drink.

However, we also see that Jesus fasted. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus fasts for forty days and nights in the wilderness.

Muslims have a tradition of fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, which started this past Wednesday. From sun up to sundown no food is eaten, though beverages are OK. Food may only be eaten after the sun goes down or before the sun comes up. I had always imagined that the fasting of Jesus was like this, though I guess it could be another miracle if Jesus ate absolutely nothing for forty days and nights. However, I assume he had some kind of nourishment to keep him alive.

Now, in general fasting is a spiritual practice to help break the bonds of this world. Fasting is a practice of abstinence. The other practices of abstinence are solitude, silence, frugality, chastity, watching, sacrifice and secrecy.

The practices of abstinence are designed to weaken or break the power of this world and move of upward in our spiritual journey. Things of this world often separate us from God and get in the way of our relationship with God.

God has created us with a healthy self that we often need to grow into. God has created a best version of you that needs to be unpacked and revealed.

Spiritual practices will strengthen us, and help us move away from the false self of the ego. We can let go of our need for control, our need for approval, and our desire to be seen as better than others. We can let go of fears that control us, and instead we can be the beautiful person that God has created us to be. And, as we study the ancient desert fathers and mothers we see that they learned that food fasting is a way of getting to know your own thoughts. We all experience hunger, and we can all tune into our thoughts, feelings, and passions about food. If we can redirect our thoughts about food, then we are all "in training" for controlling other thoughts like sex, possessions, anger, and the like.

Now, here is some of what I learned about fasting from a book by Mary Margaret Funk called "Tools Matter: Beginning the Spiritual Journey." And Funk's understanding of fasting fits with my own practice, a practice that she calls fasting the middle way.

She writes, fasting, the middle way, means to eat at designated times, to eat enough but not too much, and to eat what's given.

In contrast, abstinence fasting refers to fasting from certain types of food, such as meat, for the sake of the spiritual life. Some people abstain from meat, some from wine or strong seasonings or foods procured by undesirable means. For some, coffee, tea, or unseasonal shipped-in fruits and vegetables may fall into this category of foods that have a large carbon footprint.

Now, fasting the middle way means that it is as harmful to eat too much as it is to eat too little. When we eat too much, we are sluggish and can fall into torpor. When we eat too little, we can also be sluggish and fall into torpor, but from a lack of nourishment rather than from digestive burdens on our system. The same thing can be said for the quality of food, they can be too rich or too poor in nutrients. Both make us ill and reduce our energy for work.

Funk writes that most of the time people think of fasting as not eating or eating very little with long intervals in between. We do need to refrain from eating too often, but we should not make the opposite mistake of not eating enough. Feasting can be done in a middle way.

Now, there are exceptions to the practice of fasting. The first is for hospitality. The guest is God's beloved, so provide food for your guests and accompany them in a shared meal.

The second exception to fasting is for Feasting. On days of celebration in the larger community, one can eat and drink more. On a Feast Day richer food can be served and enjoyed. With a feast celebration extra time is often inserted for appetizers, a snack, high tea, or a desert of rich quality. All this plenty marks the day with abundance and grace. Easter and Christmas are our most well-known feast days but there are many others as well.

Funk points out that it is often enough to do a consistent daily feast of the middle way except when it is time to offer hospitality or to feast. And, middle way is very Episcopalian or Anglican, isn't it.

When food, for whatever reason, takes center stage, it often sets the seeker inward toward self rather than further along on the spiritual journey. We may find an enormous temptation to become "food focused" rather than to surrender to the more desirable Christ consciousness. Conversely, when we have a healthy relationship with food then fasting becomes a tool for our spiritual journey so that we can further unpack the true self that God has already built into us. Today, we remember the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers. We are aided on our spiritual journey when we have a healthy, mindful relationship with food. And as always, thank God for the blessing of the food we have been given.