

The Means of Grace: Fasting

**A sermon given by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, February 21, 2010**

Sermon prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, we thank you for your presence in our lives which so many times we take for granted. But we pray as we draw near to the symbols of our faith here in this sanctuary that you would speak to us, that you would fill us with your holy being and that our lives might be transformed just a little bit more into the likeness of Christ. And so open our hearts, our minds that we might receive your word this day. And in receiving it, may we live it in a way that others will come to be touched by that same word. In Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sermon:

This past Wednesday evening at the Ash Wednesday services, or actually noon time and evening, I shared that our Sunday mornings during the season of Lent there's going to be times for us to focus on the Means of Grace. Those God given gifts to us to strengthen and deepen our walk of faith with God and with one another.

And, at the time I shared that, I was also struggling with a thought that had been planted in my mind, I think it was on Monday of this week, one of the things that I enjoy doing are cryptograms. And I have a book of what's called cryptoquotes. And on Monday I happen to solve a cryptoquote from Dwight L. Moody, and any of you who know about Dwight Moody would find it very unusual for me to be sharing with you a quote from him. He is a 19th century Christian evangelist who was very outspoken about the Christian faith and was very forceful in the way he applied the Christian faith in trying to convert people to Christianity.

But I would like to share with you a quote that haunted me all week, and I couldn't get it out of my mind or out of my thoughts. Dwight Moody is quoted as having said, "We talk about heaven being so far away. It is within speaking distance to those who belong there. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people." Let me just share that again cause I think this is a thought worth wrestling with, "We talk about heaven being so far away.

It is within speaking distance to those who belong there. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people.”

My first reaction to that quote was I don't agree with it; it sounded very exclusivistic in its approach; it sounded very self-righteous to me, in fact it almost sounded like Moody was saying that there's a way for you to work your way into heaven if you just know the right things to do and the right things to say and the right way to think so that you can prepare yourself to enter heaven. And I have a feeling Mr. Moody intended it to be taken that way.

But I've come to a different understanding, or at least it brought me to a different level of thought as I wrestled with his words. The thought occurred to me that God offers to all humanity the Means of Grace as a way for us to be prepared to live the life God intended from the beginning of creation. As we practice the means of grace, God shapes our lives to become more Christ-like. Is that not the reason we have upon hearing the call of Jesus to follow; taking up our cross to follow him? The means of grace are indeed gifts from God, which as we practice them on a regular basis, God uses to reshape and reform our lives; to transform us into the likeness of our savior. And so, with that thought that the Means of Grace are God's way of preparing us to live in heaven I would like us to take a look at one of those Means of Grace. One of those spiritual disciplines that I believe is a gift from God. And it is called fasting.

Are you familiar with the rule of threes with regards to human survival? Have you ever heard of that? I never heard of it until I started to research this particular Means of Grace. You can survive three minutes without air. You can survive three hours without shelter. You can survive three days without water or three weeks without food. And in recent times, two other necessities for living and surviving desperate life-threatening ordeals have been added. You can survive three seconds without thinking, and you can survive three months without hope. I share this information to help us understand the ordeal that Jesus lived through those forty days in the wilderness that we have in our Gospel reading today. And also to help us understand the nightmare that continues to impact the lives of our brothers and sisters in Haiti. We think the relief efforts are completed, and in reality they are just getting underway.

Today, as we focus on the spiritual discipline of fasting; of going without food not for three weeks or not for forty days as Jesus practiced, but for just one day or for even a portion of a day. We allow ourselves to consider having our lives, our spiritual journeys with

God, shaped through this spiritual discipline. Now I have to confess to you that of all the spiritual disciplines, fasting gives me the most trouble; and it's not just because I like to eat. First, we must understand that the spiritual discipline of fasting is not a way for us to lose weight or to control our diet. It has absolutely nothing to do with that. If you have an eating disorder, it is my recommendation that you should not practice this spiritual discipline. And if you choose to practice this discipline, you must practice it under the guidance and with the help of your physician. Also, if you have a medical condition such as diabetes, that could be seriously impacted or compromised by not eating regularly and on a daily basis, then you should not consider this spiritual discipline. And if you do, please consult and gain the approval of your primary care doctor. Fasting is serious business, and it is my contention it's not for everyone.

It is important for all of us to know that while there are several Means of Grace, we do not have to practice all of them to be shaped by God into the creatures God intended us to be from the very beginning. The important thing for each of us to remember is that the Means of Grace are a kind of smorgasbord of spiritual disciplines. They are all good and healthy, but they are not meant to be consumed all at once; they are not meant to fill-up our spiritual plates until they are overflowing and then try to work them altogether. When you go to a smorgasbord you take what you know you like. And when you come to the smorgasbord of the spiritual disciplines of the Means of Grace, take only those that God is leading you to take, that you know that you can with God's help successfully engage in that discipline.

Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days. That is nineteen days more than the limit set by the rule of three. How could Jesus have done this? Is the Bible telling us something untrue or are the Gospel writers using an exaggerated number to emphasize that Jesus went without food for a long time? I believe that Jesus did not eat for forty days in a row. And that this is one more witness in the scriptures to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. What limits us because of our humanity does not limit Jesus because of his divinity. How Jesus could go without food for forty days and successfully survive the temptations of the devil remains a mystery to us and its acceptance by us as reality is indeed an issue of faith in whether we believe Jesus to be the Son of God, the Savior of the World.

Have you ever fasted? Perhaps it was for twelve hours prior to a blood test or surgery.

Perhaps it was because you did not have access to food for a period of time. One of my

first experiences with fasting was during a Boy Scout initiation rite. It wasn't true fasting, but it was pretty close to it. I was being initiated into a prestigious order in the Boy Scouts that required me to fast for a period of twenty-four hours. We had dinner on Friday evening at the Scout camp mess hall, and then the group of us who were being initiated into this group in Scouting were sent into the woods on our own with our sleeping bags to sleep for the night wherever we could find a spot to sleep – no tents, no pillows, just our sleeping bags.

The next morning we gathered at the Mess Hall and were given a glass of water to drink and a hard-boiled egg to eat. I didn't like hard-boiled eggs, but I have to tell you, that morning I learned to like them. We left the dining hall and we began to work around the camp. We spent our day working around the Boy Scout camp getting it ready for the summer camp activities. We worked hard. We were allowed to drink as much water as we needed but that was it. By lunch time all of us were starving. And so we were brought back to the dining hall and as we sat at the tables we were served, once again, a glass of water and this time a piece of bread. That was it – no butter, no peanut butter, no jelly - a glass of water and a piece of bread. After lunch, it was back to work sawing wood, toting logs, repairing boat docks and tent platforms, cutting down trees, moving rocks. By dinner time we all thought we were going to die and we once again gathered in the dining hall. This time, however, we were served a nice roast beef dinner. Now you have to know something – I didn't care for roast beef back then, but that day I learned to love roast beef and it didn't matter whether it was overcooked, undercooked - it was going to fill my stomach. And that was the end of our fast.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline and not an initiation rite. It is a spiritual discipline and not a preparation for a medical procedure. It is not a dietary routine to control our weight or to lose weight quickly. Fasting is one way for us to focus our lives on the true source of life, God. It is a discipline that helps us to live with the understanding that God is the most important one in our lives, even more important than food. Practicing the spiritual discipline of fasting helps our lives to be shaped by the principle that God is the one to be trusted.

Since it is possible for the practice of fasting to be misused or misunderstood, it is important for each of us to understand that the ability to fast is actually a gift from God and not an act of our will. And that is why when we come to the Means of Grace, I refer to it as a spiritual smorgasbord because there are some things that will work in your life and other

things that will not. And your plate will look different than your neighbor's plate which will look different from my plate but a wide variety is given so that we might engage in some form of spiritual discipline, but under the leading of God to have our lives more closely shaped into the life of Christ. Fasting is one way that God seeks to establish, deepen and strengthen our relationship with the Divine. God can use fasting as a way to focus our faith, not on the things of this world, but on the one who has provided all that is good for the good of all.

I believe that over the years, clergy and other spiritual leaders seeing the danger that fasting can offer to our bodies, have invited persons to fast in modified ways. For instance, there are those in the Christian community who during the season of Lent refrain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and on Fridays as one way to have a modified fast to there again redirect one back to God. There are others who give up a favorite food during the season of Lent in an effort to show to themselves that God is more important to them than that food. But here again it is an act of the human will as opposed to God leading one into that fast. So caution is the word that is operative for this spiritual discipline.

As we journey together during this Lenten season, I want to encourage you to consider taking on a spiritual discipline. In the weeks to come, we will explore some of the other Means of Gods Grace and perhaps you will find one of them as an invitation from God to try it out; to try it on for your spiritual walk with God. The ones we will be exploring on Sunday mornings are found on the cover of our bulletin this week [see below] and they will be there every week as we journey together this Lenten season. There are more Means of Grace, but we have just a few that we are going to take a look at this year.

The deeper and the stronger our relationship to God becomes, the closer I believe we find ourselves to Heaven. In fact, as we become lost in God and in Christ, Christ comes to live in and through us. And we find ourselves already living in that kingdom of joy, peace and love that we think is so far away and yet is here and begins here and now as we allow God to enter our lives and to shape our lives through the means that God has provided so that we might truly live in God's kingdom.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

From the cover of the Church bulletin - The Season of Lent; Fasting; Bible Study; Alms; Prayer; Worship.