

Acceptable Fasting
Isaiah 58:1-12

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That's a lot to take in, then and now! Let's think about this passage in more modern words.

God: "Hey Isaiah, my main man, could you give these folks a message from me? Direct from the source just doesn't seem to be getting through. Let them know that the way they are behaving is not gonna win any favors from me. Sure they are following the letter of the law, but not the spirit.

(in God's people voice): "Look at me, I'm fasting. I'm such a good person. Look at me I'm sacrificing."

(back to God speaking as God): "Sure you are. Look I love you all. You are my people. But can't take this all pious and faithful on a Sunday, and back to your selfish ways on a Monday. Do you even notice your fellow man? Can you tell them that?"

Isaiah: "You got it God."

And he relays the message.

People, upon hearing this: "Ah come on what else would you have us do? We are doing what you asked! Fasting. Praying. Taking time from our busy lives to humble ourselves and all that stuff."

Isaiah; "It is all about YOU isn't it? Reminds me of the old joke: What did one philosopher say to another? Well enough about me, what do you think of me?"

"Really, did you expect this kind of fasting and prayer to get you anywhere with the Lord? What good are sackcloth and ashes if you are then turning a blind eye to those for whom sackcloth and ashes are all they have?"

"But you can change! Let me give you the memo for acceptable fasting."

He reaches into his backpack—I am sure Isaiah carried a backpack—pulls out the memo and hands them out.

Here's what the memo said:

This should be the fast you choose. Humble yourself, do without to clear your head. Then act clear headed! Stand up for justice, let those who are oppressed breathe the air of freedom unshackled. Share your food with the hungry. Give the homeless shelter. If anyone needs a coat provide it. Do this and don't be ashamed of it! Whether relative or stranger, if you do these things, your light will shine brightly and God will hear you.

Later on Jesus added to the memo several times, including "you are the salt of the earth.

Be strong! You are the light in the darkness. Shine on so others can see their way.”

We don't know if they took the memo to heart or not. Isaiah and God of course had a lot more to say on the subject. There is a whole book on it. But I'd say the message is pretty clear: It's not about talking the talk, but walking the walk. Fasting is not merely abstinence, but marries that to the decision to follow God's command to care for the poor and oppressed, the hungry and the stranger.

What do we know of fasting? Fasting is an ancient and at the same time thoroughly modern practice. Many of the world's religions and spiritual teachings involve fasting in one form or another. I personally have tried fasting as a spiritual exercise, most often during Lent. Usually Christians practice it on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fasting during Lent is widely accepted in some Christian cultures- for example, the Catholics encourage it, and have established very strict rules.

Fasting usually means refraining from food- sometimes food and water, sometimes just a specific food- from sun up to sun down. This is the most common practice, from the Islamic month of Ramadan to Buddhists fasting to enhance meditative mindfulness. In Jewish culture it has always been part of spiritual life, especially high holy days. Fasting in most of these instances is a very personal practice, a time of intense meditation and prayer. But fasting is also used to protest injustice.

And that brings us back to Isaiah's definition of "acceptable" fasting. Could it be that fasting is not meant to just be about food, but about abstaining from some part of our daily lives? Our normal reactions to situations?

In the 8th century there was a man named Philaret. After his death, the Greek Orthodox church made him a saint, but while he was alive, he was rich and a dignitary, and was married to a beautiful woman from an upper crust family. Now he was not a normal high society guy. His wife was always getting mad at him, because he had a tendency to give away everything they had. He pointed out that yes, he gave it all away but they did not starve did they? The Lord would provide. He read the scriptures and often fasted, giving away his share of the bread.

Most of the stories we have about him sound like an early century sit-com. The crazy main character and his exasperated wife. One day a man came by who had lost his job, his house and his family due to war. He was trying to start over and had found a small farm to begin again. He asked Philaret for help. At the time, Philaret had a cow and her calf, so he gave the poor man the calf to get his farm started. The cow bellowed night and day. See? His wife said, "The cow is mad with grief. You should not have given away our calf." Philaret said, "You are right!" And immediately gave the cow to the man as well. Now that turns daily life on its head! Definitely not a normal reaction.

Be the salt of the earth, a light to the world.

Here's a modern example: German Methodist pastor Thomas Lebmann tells the story of one of his volunteers at the shelter run by the church- a young economics student from the local

university who found himself overwhelmed by the the influx of refugees to the center. He was volunteering to help keep the center afloat so he crunched the numbers and found over and over the same result. He finally told Lebmann based on available resources it was time to start turning refugees away.

The next day, he was at the center and heard a new arrival tell her story. She was originally from Eritrea in Africa where she lived with her mother, father, brother and sister. The family moved to Ethiopia as refugees the first time when her father died fighting for the Eritrea army when she was 3. Several years later, as they began to feel at home, her brother was arrested by Ethiopian authorities and the family was encouraged to leave quickly. She never saw her brother again. They moved to Sudan.

Soon, civil war broke out in Sudan and the family was robbed and beaten, and her sister was raped, and left in a comatose state.

The young woman was now in her teens, and her mother, who refused to leave her sister encouraged her by herself, to move again, this time to Libya where she worked for two years again under the shadow of another war. She learned a trade, finally raising enough money to send some home to her mother and to get herself to Germany. Now, she said, she finally felt safe and had a job, but was living as a stranger in a strange land apart from her family.

Two weeks later, Lebmann called that economics student who had been so worried about the numbers, and he was at a football game with several of the new refugees. Lebmann writes “This student, who only days earlier had wondered about rejecting those seeking asylum, had now formed a group that invites refugees to local cultural events to make them feel more a part of the community.” The community involvement also raised the profile of the center, and bigger more frequent donations made the student’s initial concerns a non-issue.

Shaking up normal reactions to a situation, and for a student such as this one, way outside the norm!

Think about YOUR life this week. Think you might have an opportunity to practice acceptable fasting? Our world these days gives us way too many chances. In fact the divide between the haves and the have nots seems to be insurmountable at times.

What can one person do?

What would Jesus ask of one person? If you are like me, that’s a tough one. We hear stories like the ones I just told, where people step outside the norm and meet need where they find it. Me? I am an introvert. The Myers Briggs personality test we had to do in grad school could not have labeled me a bigger “I”. I want to help, to serve. Mission is for me a primary objective of organized religion. But I have a tendency to overthink things, to worry about the future. To be afraid of the unknown. And to not want to make waves. I could pretty much guarantee Philaret was not an introvert. It may be hard for me, but it is my calling to serve, to teach, to preach, to sing. I cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering in the world. I will do what I can. That is what Jesus asks of me.

What would Jesus ask of any of us? Take care of each other. He mentioned helping the poor and oppressed more than any other admonition in the Bible. Over two hundred times! He encouraged walking the walk. You are the salt of the earth. Be the flavor, provide the stability. Do what you can to preserve your community. If salt loses its taste- if we stop doing what we can- we lose our effectiveness to spread the Gospel. You are the light of the world- be proud of it and show it off to light other's paths. Be a good example, a good citizen, a good family member, good worker, good friend. The scouts are such examples. What would Jesus ask of you? To love one another. Do the best you can, when you can.

Today is an opportunity to step outside the norm in a little way. When one thinks of this day, probably one of the first things to come to mind is the Super Bowl. Regardless of who is playing, it is a party. It is something we do collectively- usually one of if not THE highest rated television event of the year. Family, friends gather in small groups or huge halls, and celebrate excess: checking out the world of professional football, athletes, and celebrities, while we eat a lot and watch for who is going to have the best commercial. Truly the opposite of fasting I would think.

But today is also the Souper Bowl with a U. Our church has long been involved in this day of giving back, back to when I was youth minister to the young women who are your youth leaders now. This is also something we do collectively- we join today with churches all over the world as we donate canned goods and money to feed the hungry in our own community, through GraceWorks and the Society of St. Andrews.

Let's turn the Super Bowl tradition on its ear. Different than a normal Super Bowl celebration, but a celebration none the less!! It may not be a day of traditional fasting, but it is a day of acceptable fasting- compassion for the poor and oppressed, the hungry and the stranger.

After the service, congratulate a scout and hear their stories. These young men and women are the light. Be the salt: Put some peanut butter or jelly in the box as you leave, or a few dollars in the soup pot. Ask questions about the charities we support and how you might support them or volunteer. Find ways in your own life to practice acceptable fasting- there is room in every day for compassion.

I have Scottish blood. Our call to worship was a Celtic prayer. The prayer I am about to say is by St. Francis, who really should have been Scottish. And even though we did not talk about it, Margie included a Celtic hymn- Be Thou My Vision. This service and these words are a little glimpse into what makes me ME.

My Scottish grandfather was a first generation American. He arrived in this country around a century ago, with his parents and siblings. They had the same fear of the unknown, the uncertain future, that everyone else had that day and every day stepping on to American soil. Don't know how they were greeted that day. But I do know they had hard times and good times. They had life. He had my mother, and she had me. And that is also what makes me ME. We are a nation of the stranger, whether recent or several generations removed. And any of us at some point could be that stranger. Or hungry. Or homeless. Or down on their luck. In need of the light of Christ from another. Jesus said to each of us; YOU are the light of the world

Shine that light so that others may find their way. That's acceptable fasting.

Let us pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred , let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master grant that I am not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as you understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.