

Fasting is not something we Methodists have been accused of doing too much of! In fact, the opposite is true. Pot-luck is our middle name, and if you don't believe it stick around after the service and watch us eat in the fellowship hall. Our idea of fasting is two chicken legs instead of three or one piece of pie instead of two! It's interesting how we embrace some spiritual disciplines, while at the same time we either take lightly or totally disregard others. We embrace the spiritual disciplines of prayer, study, and worship, but for whatever reason, we tend to ignore the spiritual discipline of fasting.

I know in my own Christian journey fasting has not been tops on the list of things to do. I have never seriously fasted, but fasting, according to the Bible, is just as much a spiritual discipline as prayer and worship. The biblical list of those who engaged in the discipline of fasting is impressive: Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Paul, and Jesus Christ just to name a few. Then there are those in the Christian tradition who have practiced fasting: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, etc. That got me to thinking. If Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Paul, and Jesus Christ himself fasted, then why don't I fast? If Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley thought it was important, then why don't I?

I'd like to be able to laugh it off and say, "I'm a Methodist pastor and it's impossible for us to fast," but the real reason is that I have never seen the value in fasting. The truth is I need to come to understand the spiritual value of fasting.

Richard Foster wrote a book entitled: *Celebration of Discipline*. In the book he discusses several different spiritual disciplines, including fasting. In his chapter on fasting he wrote:

"Throughout Scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. It stands in distinction to the hunger strike, the purpose of which is to gain political power or attract attention to a good cause. It is also distinct from health dieting which stresses abstinence from food for physical, not spiritual, purposes. Because of the secularization of modern society, fasting is usually motivated either by vanity or by the desire for power."

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Biblical fasting is different. That is not to say that the above mentioned motives concerning fasting are necessarily “wrong”, but it is to say that in the Biblical sense fasting is strictly for spiritual purposes. We do not fast to “get our way”. Foster wrote, ‘Fasting reminds us that we are sustained “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Matt. 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us. Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God.’ When we fast we are reminded of who sustains us.

Last week we talked about how Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John up the mountain to pray. This week we find Jesus in the wilderness. He had been led by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness for a time of testing. For forty days he was tempted by the devil, and during those forty days we are told that he ate nothing. I find it fascinating why Jesus was in the wilderness in the first place. He was in the wilderness because he was led by the Holy Spirit. Why on earth would the Holy Spirit lead Jesus into a difficult situation?

Very often when you hear people talk about how the Spirit moved them or directed them, they speak in positive terms: “The Spirit moved me to serve at the homeless shelter.” “The Spirit directed me to take the promotion at work.” “The Spirit guided me to move to Florida on the beachfront!” Now I can listen to that kind of Spirit! But what if the Holy Spirit leads us into a difficult situation, what do we do then? Do we ignore the Holy Spirit and say, “Come back when you have a better offer?” Unfortunately, that’s not a viable option. There are times when the Holy Spirit leads us into difficult situations. The work of God’s kingdom doesn’t always take place on our terms or our turf. Very often, like Jesus we are led where we would not choose on our own, but it’s in those times in those places where we grow the most.

Jesus spent forty restless days in the wilderness fighting temptation. Forty days is a long time. In our society we are all about convenience and getting things done in a timely fashion. Whatever it is we want it done yesterday. I was going to the hospital in Waco on Tuesday and I stopped at Burger King to pick up some breakfast. I walked inside and placed my order. After the lady behind the counter took my order and money, she handed me my coffee and sandwich to go and said, “Two minutes and thirty seconds.” I said, “What?” She said again, “Two minutes and thirty seconds. From the time you placed your order until the time you were served it was

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two minutes and thirty seconds.” I didn’t know what to say at that point. So I said, “Why do you keep track of the time? Does it really matter that I got my food in two minutes and thirty seconds?” “Oh, yes it matters. The manager wants us to get the food out as quick as possible so we can keep the line moving. We don’t want people to get upset if it takes too long.”

As I drove off I thought about what an impatient society we have become. We want everything right and we want it right now. We don’t want to wait for much of anything. Has anyone here ever sat in front of a computer monitor and tapped your finger on the desk? I know you have. I know you have looked at that computer monitor and said to yourself, “Boy I wish we had a faster Internet connection! Why doesn’t this thing move faster?” I know you have stood in line at the grocery store and tapped your foot impatiently as the man in front of you fumbled around for some loose change to pay for a pack of cigarettes. We are an impatient group, but we come by it honestly. Our society has trained us to expect everything to happen now. If it doesn’t happen now then something must be wrong.

That may be okay if we are talking about a value meal at a fast food restaurant, but it’s not okay if we are talking about our faith. It would be extremely pretentious of us to go to God in prayer and demand that God operate on our time schedule. We are going to share in communion the next several Sundays. I have done this before at previous churches. One of the members at one of those churches said, “You know when you have communion every Sunday some people won’t come to church. It takes too long.” He then felt compelled to give me a lecture on people’s lifestyles. He said, “You need to understand something. People lead busy lives these days and they don’t want to spend all day at church.”

I replied sarcastically, “Oh, I’m so sorry. How silly of me to infringe on people’s schedules like that. Tell you what, why don’t you go tell them, whoever “them” happens to be (I knew it was him all along), that they can take the next few weeks off altogether. Don’t show up for anything. They can use that time to do whatever they want and catch up on all the comp time that is coming their way. Then when we are back to our regular schedule we will notify them. I certainly don’t want to offend anyone by sharing in the Lord’s Supper more than once a month God forbid.” That was the last conversation I had with that person concerning communion, or anything else for that matter!

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Some of the best things in life take time. Think about relationships. The best relationships we enjoy are those that are built over a lifetime. Jesus spent **forty days** in the wilderness, not 40 seconds. The time that Jesus spent wrestling with temptation was not wasted time but time well spent. It was an experience that would ultimately shape his mission and call. We should remember that when we go through tough times. God's timing is perfect and sufficient for all our needs, and we should be patient with ourselves and God.

Apparently, the time was right for Jesus to be tempted. The devil tempted Jesus in different ways with different motivations. I have heard before that temptation is a sign of weakness, but that is not really the case. Temptation is an indication of strength because we are tempted not at our weak points, but at our strong points. It's interesting to note that all the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness were opportunities to rise. The devil did not tempt him with things that would bring him down, at least in the world's eyes. He tempted him with those things that most people would think are valuable and worthy.

I'm typically not a huge fan of game shows, but I must admit I like the show "*Deal or No Deal*". If you have seen this show you know it is based on whether or not the contestant will sell his or her briefcase which holds an undisclosed amount of money. The banker, who sits upstairs, makes offers throughout the show for the briefcase. The offers go up and down depending on the different amounts of money remaining on the board. Howie Mandell, the host of the show, points his finger at the contestant and says, "The offer is \$97,000! Deal or No Deal?" Then the contestant agonizes over whether or not he or she should pick another case. The devil and Jesus were engaged in their own game of Deal or No Deal and the devil was the one asking, "Deal or No Deal?"

The first temptation or "deal" was to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. Remember, Jesus had been fasting for forty days and was famished, so this offer to turn a stone into a loaf of bread was tempting to say the least. Jesus was hungry and what would be wrong with turning a stone into a loaf of bread? The problem, of course, was the condition set by the devil, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread. Deal or No Deal?" The Greek text could be translated more literally, "**Since** you are the Son of God..." The point at issue, then, is not whether Jesus is God's Son, but rather how Jesus' status and power before God are to be employed.

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In other words, would Jesus trust God to provide for him or would he need to turn stones into bread. Jesus' answer was clear: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" In other words, Jesus would trust God. **No Deal!**

The second deal involved power. The devil led Jesus up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. The devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours. Deal or No Deal?" Jesus thought about it for a second and answered, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" **No Deal!**

A third time the devil came to Jesus and took him to Jerusalem. He placed him on the pinnacle of the great temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" You guessed it – **No Deal!**

I think it's interesting to note that when we say "No" to something we are saying "Yes" to something else. The other day I was at a meeting in Waco and at one point in the meeting we were discussing wills. The speaker made an interesting comment. He said, "How many of you have a will?" About 30% of the group raised their hands. He then said, "Actually, all of you have a will. The ones that raised their hands are the ones who have determined their own will. The ones who didn't have said, "My will is that I want the state to have total control over my stuff when I die." Everyone has a will. I thought that was clever.

It's true, when we say no to something we are saying yes to something else. When I say, "No, I don't want to go to the movies with you," I am really saying, "Yes," to staying home and taking a nap. When I say, "No, I don't want to drink a six pack and drive home," I am really saying, "Yes," to staying out of jail and being a responsible person. When I say, "No, I don't want to take that promotion at work," I am really saying, "Yes," to keeping my family in a loving community where they are happy.

When Jesus said, "No," he was saying, "Yes" at the same time. When he said, "No, I don't want to turn that stone into a loaf of bread," he was

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really saying, “Yes,” to trusting God to provide for him. When he said, “No, I don’t want to rule all the kingdoms of the world,” he was really saying, “Yes, I want to be known as someone who didn’t have to use violence or power to get things done.” When he said, “No, I don’t want to throw myself off the temple,” he was really saying, “Yes,” to humility and making himself vulnerable.

Speaking of vulnerability, I’m sure you have noticed the cross to my right. Jesus hung on one of these for you and me. He didn’t do it because he wanted to. No one would willingly want to die by crucifixion. It was a terrible way to die. He hung on a cross because he said, “No.” He said no to the way of violence and power in human terms, and at the same time he said, “Yes.” He said, “Yes” to love. He said, “Yes” to grace. He said, “Yes” to forgiveness. He said, “Yes” to reconciliation. He said, “Yes” to redemption. The greatest question in the history of humanity had been posed – the cross was before Jesus and the question was, “Are sinful human beings worth dying for?” Another way of asking the same question might be, “Deal or No Deal?” Jesus thought enough of us to take the deal and die for you and me. So my question for you today is this: “If you really believe that Jesus died on the cross for you, when it comes to following him and making him your Lord, how would you answer the question, ‘Deal or No Deal?’