

Ash Wednesday Sermon 2016  
February 10, 2016  
Pastor James Preus  
Trinity Lutheran Church  
Matthew 6:16-21  
Focusing on Christ

Christians don't fast, right? Well, at least *Lutherans* don't. That's just old Dark Age stuff isn't it? Didn't Jesus say we didn't have to fast? These are common misconceptions. Truly, Christians do have the freedom to fast or not to fast. Saint Paul writes, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:13) So it is not whether you fast or not (necessarily), but whether you do it to the God's glory. Jesus isn't teaching us *not* to fast, but *how* to fast. Don't walk about with a gaunt face moaning in hunger, mentioning at every opportunity how you're fasting. If you fast, don't tell anyone. Do it to the glory of God.

Well, okay, Christians can fast if they want, but it's not Lutheran to fast right? Well, even Martin Luther writes in the Small Catechism, which we still teach to our children. "Who receives this sacrament worthily? Answer: Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'" Luther calls fasting fine outward training, yet declares that *faith* is significantly more important. So how do you *fast* to the glory of God? Only if you use the opportunity of fasting to focus on your faith. You can glorify God in no greater way than fully trusting in him through faith.

So what benefits can fasting give? First, depriving yourself of luxuries and pleasures can help you focus on God's providence. By not eating more than you need, you can remind yourself that God will feed you again tomorrow. When you pray, "Give

us this day our daily bread” you will remember that God *promises* to do just that! Everyday! Secondly, such discipline teaches us to *repent*. Are you sorry for your sins? When you sincerely apologize to someone for wronging him, do you do it with a laugh and a smirk, or do you show contrition in your voice? Fasting can *remind* you that you are actually sorry to *Someone* for *something*. Giving up something you enjoy for a time can show yourself and your heavenly Father that you are truly sorry. (Of course fasting in no way earns God’s favor or forgiveness).

Thirdly, depriving yourself of something you enjoy can in a very small way teach you about Christ’s passion. Jesus willingly suffered tremendously for you. He was not forced to endure such pain and death, but went willingly out of love for you. So as St. John teaches us, “In this is love, not that we have loved God, but he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10) so we respond with a small token of love to God by willingly giving up some pleasure. Fasting isn’t an end to itself. It teaches us to focus on Christ’s passion for our sins.

Finally, self-deprivation teaches us that man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. By taking your focus away from things you enjoy that do not cause you to grow in faith, you make room for the opportunity to focus on the things that *do* grow your faith. Sweets and meats give strength to the body, but they do not help the soul. Only God’s Word creates faith and sustains it to eternal life. If you spend an hour watching TV before you go to bed, by giving that up you can use that time to say prayers for yourself and others and read the Bible.

By taking your eyes off the ground you can more clearly see the heavens. Saint Paul says, “having nothing, yet possessing all things.” By taking your eyes off earthly possessions and pleasures, you make room to see that you possess something infinitely greater than all the treasures in the world. It is beneficial to your faith to count everything you have, food, drink, job, sports, clothing, all of it as nothing, so that you can see the everything God has in store for you.

Saint Peter admonishes us, “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:5-8).

You have the freedom not to fast and the freedom to fast. Yet, the Christian Church from very early on observed the tradition of fasting during the forty days of Lent. They reserved this time to deprive themselves of pleasure, so to focus on their sinful condition, repentance, Christ’s Suffering, and God’s Word. They are not forty days to fast for fasting’s sake. They’re forty days to increase in faith and trusting in Christ’s passion. So you have the freedom to fast or not to fast. Yet Saint Paul writes, “All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up.” (1 Corinthians 10:9) So whether you fast or not, make sure it’s helpful. Focus on building up your faith. If giving something up helps, do it. If it doesn’t, don’t. But whatever you do, do it to the glory of God.

I have challenged all of you to recite the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, and the Lord's Prayer everyday during these forty days as well as reading the Bible daily. I pray you do it, because such an exercise is helpful and builds up the faith to the glory of God. Whether you fast or not, I don't really care. I wouldn't know if you did anyway. But when you take your eyes off what you think you have on earth, you see clearer what you *do* have through Christ. If Christ's suffering and dying is your treasure, then your treasure is in heaven, because that is where the risen Christ is. And if you identify yourself with Christ's suffering and dying during these forty days, you will also identify yourself with Christ's resurrection on Easter morning.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.