

### “Fasting for Love”

Giving up something for Lent seems to be one of those things that liturgical Christians (in particular Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans) do that mystifies non-liturgical Christians especially evangelical and non-denominational Christians. They wonder how giving up something would make one closer to God, especially if you are going to return to it after Lent. If giving up something would help us get closer to God, we should stick with it for more than forty days.

No doubt there is truth in that. The original idea of a Lenten Fast was to imitate Jesus’ forty day fast in the wilderness. The Lenten Fast was also to remind us that it is God’s love that sustains us. As Jesus said we “do not live by bread alone.”<sup>1</sup> However, a complete forty-day fast from food and drink would kill a human being, at least one that was not also divine. Thus the Lenten practice became a fast from a luxury, which in the Middle Ages was meat.

As our lives have moved beyond subsistence our luxuries have become more varied. Over the years I have heard a variety of choices for the Lenten fast. People I know have given up smoking, soft drinks in general and Coke Zero in particular, coffee or all caffeine, sweets especially chocolate, TV, fast food, swearing, and beer or alcohol altogether.

However, if our goal is to become closer to God, closer to Jesus, and a more deeply spiritual Christian I am not sure that any of these is actually the best route to take. Instead I would refer you to a list attributed to Pope Francis. You might find these fasts more challenging than giving up coffee, chocolate, or any other bodily luxury. For our convenience I have listed them on the back of today’s worship bulletin.

The list of eleven possible fasts is more than one person can take on. But each of us could pick one or two of them we find particularly applicable to our life. We might be quick to anger and need to learn healing words. Perhaps we need to refocus our lives to gratitude. Perhaps there is a hole that needs to be filled with hope or joy. Perhaps we are weighed down by grudges, bitterness, or pressure and fasting from them could open us up to reconciliation, compassion or prayer.

I suggest you take this bulletin home. Cut out the list and pray with it. Ask God’s help in identifying the one thing you will fast from this Lent. Then focus on it. Highlight your choice and carry the list with you or put it on the mirror or refrigerator where you will see it and be reminded. Take on this fast because it is good for you, but also because it is good for others.

The fourth century bishop and mystic John Chrysostom wrote “No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great.”

Let your fast produce something good for yourself and others. Let your fast make such a difference in your life that when Lent ends it is not something you want to return to but instead find you want to continue. God does not want empty sacrifices. God wants your heart and nothing less. Give God your heart and while you may be challenged you will never be disappointed. For God’s love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”<sup>2</sup> and heals all things.<sup>3</sup> May this Lenten journey be one full of love and healing for you and for everyone you meet.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:4

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:7

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 21:4