

Fast with a Purpose

Means of Grace: Part 2 “Fast with a Purpose”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – September 20th, 2020

16th Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: Joel 2:12-17; Acts 14:21-23; Matthew 6:16-18

Reflection: Psalm 98

Greeting: May the grace and peace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, be with you on this day! I pray that as we join together in worship, in whatever way we join together, that we be united by one Spirit, serving the Father, in the truth of the Son. Let us celebrate the love of Christ that brings us together in God’s care. Praise the Lord!

Prayer: God, we seek you on this day. Guide us as we gather together this day, as you do in all things. As we lift up our prayers to you this day, we ask that our faith be lifted, and our resolve be strengthened. Let us be drawn together that we may worship in the grace and peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 98

A Psalm. O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity. (Psalm 98 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 98 and we hear of how wonderful God is. That we should sing a new song about all of the ways God is great. That all of creation should celebrate the Lord. That God is one who deals fairly with people. How do you celebrate God in your life? What are the joyful noises that you make? How do you share that joy with others? How do you help others experience the marvels of God’s love? What does God mean to you?

Prayer: God, our hope and salvation. Give us a new heart that celebrates all that you are in our lives. Grant us the faith we need to seek your wisdom and love and to give that wisdom and love to others. Show us the way that we may find the words that help us and others to heal and find hope. Help us that we may grow in your grace and mercy, and that we may find peace in your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Joel chapter 2, verses 12 through 17.

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow; tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive. Who knows whether he will have a change of heart and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? Blow the horn in Zion; demand a fast; request a special assembly. Gather the people; prepare a holy meeting; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the groom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the Lord's ministers, weep. Let them say, "Have mercy, Lord, on your people, and don't make your inheritance a disgrace, an example of failure among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

(Joel 2:12-17 CEB+)

Our next reading is from Acts chapter 14, verses 21 through 23.

Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the good news to the people in Derbe and made many disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, where they strengthened the disciples and urged them to remain firm in the faith. They told them, "If we are to enter God's kingdom, we must pass through many troubles." They appointed elders for each church. With prayer and fasting, they committed these elders to the Lord, in whom they had placed their trust.

(Acts 14:21-23 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Matthew, chapter 6, verses 16 through 18.

"And when you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. Then you won't look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

(Matthew 6:16-18 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

So I decided to do fasting as the second in our series about means of grace. Because fasting gets tied in with prayer, and I wanted to make sure we talked about prayer first. Now,

fasting can feel a little daunting. And I think it's because for some of us, not eating feels like a very big thing. And I think that it's also one of those things that some of us may feel isn't appropriate for our situation. And so, first I want to talk about the act of fasting and focus in on what it means to fast, and what our ideas of fasting are. And so with that, I want to look first at the way that Jesus talked about fasting. So, Jesus tells us things that we're not supposed to do when we fast. And one of those is making yourself look all bent out of shape. Making it so that you look like you are hurting. Instead, Jesus says, make sure that you look normal, that you look good, and that you take care of yourself, and that the fast is not an outward sign, but an inward sign. And then only, just like prayer, to your father in secret is your fast truly recognized.

So I was thinking about this, because fasting is one of those things that we often end up leaving out of our practices. And I think a big part of it is because it does feel daunting at times to intentionally go without eating. And so I want to open up by saying that I'm going to start with talking about traditional fasts as an abstinence from food but I'm going to talk later about other ways we can fast. So there's a lot of different ways you can fast. People often get hung up on thinking that it's got to be something huge. You know, they take the example of Jesus fasting for 40 days in the wilderness and go, gosh, well, I can't do that. Well, you know, I don't think anybody could go for a complete and total fast for that long and not struggle. And luckily, God doesn't ask us that. He doesn't demand that we fast for terribly long periods of time and put ourselves at risk. Fasting should always be done in a way that is healthy. You can fast for an entire day. A whole day of going without eating, but you can also go a meal. Say you fast for lunch. And after you eat in the morning, you don't eat again until you break the fast for dinner and that counts too. Because the point is that you inwardly make recognition that you are abstaining from something with a purpose. Now, what does it mean to fast with a purpose? If you just skip lunch, and you don't think about why, that's not a fast, that's just missing lunch. The difference is how you spend that time and the purpose you have in it. One of the ways that we could look at it is that if we are fasting with a purpose, part of that should be that we spend some of that time in prayer. That we recognize that we are withholding something from ourselves so that we may grow closer to God. And there's different ways you can do that. You could spend most of it in prayer and reading scripture and taking that time to focus on that, even if you are abstaining from eating, God will sustain you. There's also ways that you can take it and turn it into something bigger if you want. And by bigger, I don't mean greater. I just mean going beyond that inward reflection. You could take the money that you would have spent on food for those times and donate it to charity. You could recognize the hunger in yourself and recognize that there are those that face it not by choice, not by will, but by necessity. Taking the act of you giving it up freely is also a way to help those that can't do that. And so, your act of fasting not only is an act as a way to connect you directly to God, but it's also a way to do God's will and help those who are struggling.

I think this is terribly important because fasting can be done individually, or it can be done in a group and we see some other purposes for fasting. In Acts, our reading today shows that when they appointed elders for the church, they prayed, and they fasted to commit them. They took that time to be in prayer and to abstain, so that they could focus in not on anything else but focus in on making sure they were ready. They took all their focus away from those

rituals of eating and comfort, and they took that time to make sure others are prepared to serve. One other example that we get in our readings for today is from the prophet Joel. In returning to God, those that have gone astray return with all their hearts and with fasting. As part of their repentance. Instead of being showy, much like Jesus says, God doesn't want them to tear their clothing, but tear your hearts. That might sound a little odd but really it means open your heart for something new. Tear away, those things that have been keeping you from God. Abstain from eating so that you may rejoin God. And they do it together as a group which, at first, you might say but Jesus told us to fast in secret. Now, here's the thing. Jesus said it so that you wouldn't be showing off to other people, saying "Look at me, I'm fasting." However, if you fast in a group of people who are fasting with you, you become a support network. You strengthen each other, encourage each other, pray for each other, build each other up in Scripture, and you do better because of that connectedness. Now, maybe it's just a phone call to say that you know we are fasting together at this time and I've been praying for you. Maybe it's a text message. It can be almost anything, but that support helps because then you're in a common goal focusing on each other to focus on God. The entire point of fasting is that you get rid of the distractions and give something up of yourself to make more room for God.

Something that is difficult is that not everybody will feel comfortable with abstaining from food. I know people that have had troubles because they say, "well if I don't eat at all It's not going to go well for me." Maybe you have to manage your blood sugar. Maybe you're like me, and if you go too long without drinking anything you can be hydrate easily. My solution to you is that you don't always have to do a full abstaining. You don't always have to say I'm just not going to eat anything. You could set yourself a simple meal. I know that before for Lent, I have decided that I would set my lunch to be an exact thing that I would have every day. It was just a very small meal. And it was the same meal every day. Enough to get me through, that I'd have the energy to be able to chase after children and keep doing everything I was doing. But I would go from breakfast to dinner, and I would have my one small meal and I would drink water and reflect upon that meal as something that I was doing as a dedication to God. That I would recognize that I eat that small sandwich and I eat this small applesauce and I drink my water and I go about my day knowing that I did it because I am trying to focus in, instead of on deciding what I'm going to eat, but how better I can connect to God. It's an important thing to be able to do. Too often we think fasting is too difficult and so we just don't do it.

And maybe you don't feel comfortable fasting from food. To that I say okay. I think that a fast can be more than that. When we talk about giving things up for Lent, it's a form of fasting. We can make that part of our weekly life. Our daily life. Maybe you want to practice only fasting one day of the week from something. Maybe it's fasting from social media. Maybe it's fasting from television. Maybe it's fasting from the internet all together. Maybe it's fasting from the newspaper. Maybe it's not reading if that's something that you do a lot of. And instead of reading your normal books you spend the time reading prayer and scripture. In the time that you'd normally be watching television, you take that time to pray and to study. And I think one of the beautiful things about being able to choose a fast is that we do have to choose something that is important. If not important, is something that we do on a regular basis. You can't really say that you're fasting from alcohol if you never drink. You can't say that you're

fasting from television if you don't normally watch television at all. You can't say that you are fasting from your smartphone if you don't own a smartphone. However, when we take something that is part of our daily life and we remove it for a time, that act of fasting is a conscious decision to not do something that we would normally do in order to instead focus on our relationship with God. And that's the true purpose of a fast. Whether it's food or whether it's something else, the point is that you grow in your connectedness.

And you know what? Maybe you stay off of Facebook for the entire day. And instead in the time that you'd normally be checking it, you pray for the people that you know. Maybe it's turning the TV off. If you always have it on in the background just to have something on, and you take that time to think about all the people in your life that you're thankful for and all the people you can think of that need help and you take extra time to pray for them and pray to God that you'll be an instrument of his love and his grace and his mercy. That you may do his will and help those people that you know and help people that you don't know. When we fast in that way it really does help us to grow, because it means that we are giving up something of ourselves to let God take up that space. And if you wanted to really really fast you could take a day and abstain from all those things. Abstain from food, abstain from all of those little pleasures, abstain from all those things and take a day to be in Scripture and to be in prayer. To commune with the Holy Spirit to recenter yourself. Because it is an act of sacrifice. And in that act of sacrifice, we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice for us. In that giving up of something, we are reminded of Christ giving up his life for us. And then when we are in prayer, it reminds us of all that, and reminds us to be thankful and gives us a clear focus of what we are thankful for, and what our mission is. We can focus in on all the things that Christ taught us and try to be more like that and take the time to remember them.

So, my point for fasting is to tell you that if you fast with a purpose and your purpose, and your purpose is to grow connected to God, that God will strengthen you and help you to do it. Whether it's through other people, whether it is through prayer, whether it is just through sheer will that God strengthens you. God will help you to do it. And maybe you take little steps to get used to it. Maybe you pick something and try it out once a week. Maybe you start for a short time. If you're someone who snacks all day, dedicate a period of time in which there will be no snacking and every time that you think about snacking, you pray instead. And if you're someone who has the TV on all the time, set aside an hour where the TV goes off and the Scriptures are opened. And you fast from those daily things so that you may reconnect to God. And the neat thing is that when you do this, you find that it becomes easier to do it more often, because you find God strengthening you. You find God opening your heart. You find Christ entering in and you find the Holy Spirit there for you. And suddenly fasting doesn't seem so foreign and so daunting. But fasting becomes one of those things that we can do anytime to connect to God. So I encourage you find a way to fast, even if it's something small to start with. A start to a closer a relationship with God is always good and always worth it. You will find that it becomes easier as you go. And you don't have to worry about being one of those people who can fast for an entire day, because God recognizes what each of us is capable of, and what each of us can and should do and God helps us through that. So find a way to fast with a purpose. Find a way to fast so that you can connect your heart more closely to Christ. Fast so

that you may find a way that prayer may fill you in ways that you never experienced. Fast in a way that helps you to connect those outside of your world. That you may give to others and that you may help to make the world a better place in God's image by growing closer to him and your hearts. And we will find that fasting, as a means of grace, strengthens us, guides us, and leads us into a life of closer unity. With God our Father. With Christ our Savior. That lets us commune with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: Lord, forgive us we pray. We come before you as those who have sinned against you in what we say and do. We come before you as those who have sinned against you in what we do not say and what we do not do. It is in our doings and our failings that we seek your grace and your mercy. We haven't loved you how we should. We haven't loved each other how we should. We are a people who are sorry, who humbly seek your forgiveness. Help us to live with one another in your mercy and your grace. Let us always remember the sacrifice made by our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ, that we may understand your deep love for us. May we honor that love by sharing it with one another, loving as you love and caring as you care. Help us to be of one body redeemed by one blood, serving one God. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed in the weekly update. If you are interested in online giving, please contact me. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: We go forth now that we may be ministers of the good news wherever we go. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Until we meet again. **Amen.**

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Angie Veach	Diane Washburn	Bill Calvert	Eric Veach
Cathy Devall	Brock McMorris	Ed & Verna Titus	Hayden Kanizer
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Laura Eubank Allison	Nancy Sowers
Cindy Cisney	Patti Corder & Crew	Nancy Hoke	Don Wells
Tricia Adkins	Ronnie & Elaine Carlen	Pat Nebel	Don Stewart
Earlene Shupe	Brenda Hurt	Anne Winkler Heinrichs	Ken Bushur
Tommy Jester	Michael & Makenzie Reynolds	Bill Gilbert	Family of Bill Huddleston
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Nora Werner & Family	Wayne Carrell
Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Lois Woolever	Mary White	Nick Nichols
Family of Novella Claiborn	Leo Smith	Dan Eubank	Family of Charlotte Carrell
Greg Williams	Eloise Buffenmeyer	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte	Family of Lyle Whitley		

Offerings may be mailed to your local treasurer or addressed to:

Rev Camron D St. Michael

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

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Our Current Series – Means of Grace

This series looks at the things that we do to connect to God so that we grow in discipleship.

September 13th – *A Heart of Prayer* – Prayer connects us to God.

September 20th – *Fast with a Purpose* – How should we fast?

September 27th – *A Mind for Study* – Study helps our spiritual growth.

October 4th – *A Thirst for Justice* – Seeking justice is part of the mission.

October 11th – *The Poor and Hungry* – Caring for others is care for God.

October 18th – *Worship Together* – We come together to grow together.

9/20/2020 Update from Pastor Cameron

Greetings! Time for a weekly update!

We are continuing in both online and in person worship at this time. I am thankful for all of the work that everyone has done to make this possible. As we return to in person worship, please contact me for details or see prior weekly updates for all of the current safety precautions.

I apologize that my time has seemed to be disappearing as of late, as I am dealing with school in home, which tends to take up a lot more time than I'm used to in the day.

Charge conference is set to be a virtual meeting on October 8th at 7pm. I would like as much of the church council to meet as possible. I will have more details soon about that.

If you know someone who would like to receive printed information every week, please let me know. If you come to this online, feel free to share it.

The church is still active and working, and as such, still needs your financial support. Please contact me or the church treasurer for options. Thank you for your continued support.

Please see the CDC website for information on the Coronavirus.

Please stay safe. You are all in my prayers. I will keep you updated as best I can. If you have any questions, feel free to contact your Church Council Chair or myself.

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael

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