

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

March 27th, 2011 (#430a) - Third Sunday in Lent

Title: "When There's Work To Be Done" (Eighth in a Series on "Lord, Teach Us To Pray")

Text: Acts 13:1-3

Please turn with me to the 13th chapter of the book of Acts. Acts chapter 13, beginning with verse 1. Hear God's unchanging Word.

*In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had **fasted and prayed**, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13: 1-3; NIV) This is God's Word.*

Eighteen days ago - with the arrival of Ash Wednesday - we entered the season of Lent. Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a time in the church year that has been set aside for special reflection and taking stock of our lives... a time when we are reminded of our sin and our need to be made right with God. Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Church as a preparatory time for Easter, when the faithful rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism which would take place on Easter Sunday. By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days. While Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days in the wilderness, many Christians have chosen to practice the discipline of "giving up" something for Lent. They may give up a favorite food, such as chocolate or coffee, or a favorite activity, such as television or watching movies. But once Lent is over, so is the "giving up."

This morning I want to speak on the subject of **fasting and prayer**. While the neglect of truth followed by its rediscovery often results in its overemphasis, I would hope to give this theme the weight that scripture gives to it.

In an interview with *People Magazine* (Jan. 19, 1981), singer and actress Dolly Parton surprised the interviewer at one point. When asked, "Where did you ever get such a strong character?", Dolly proceeded to tell her about her family and her Christian faith.

"What about psychiatry?" asked the interviewer. "So many people find the need to get [psychiatric] counseling, especially in the stresses of show business."

"No," said Dolly, "I don't see a psychiatrist. I fast instead."

"You *what*?"

"I fast!"

"Is that like a diet?"

"No!" said Dolly. "I do it to get in touch with God! Sometimes I'll ... fast 7, 14, or 21 days ... I don't drink nothing but water and I don't ever say when I'm on a fast - Scripture says you're not supposed to." And then she went on to say that she's never made a major decision without fasting and prayer.

Over the years as I have read the autobiographies and diaries of some of the great men and women of faith, I have been impressed by the number who almost offhandedly mentioned the fact that they participated in the spiritual discipline of fasting. People like Calvin, Knox, and Luther, Jonathon Edwards and John Wesley, Charles Finney and David Brainerd have all testified to its value. This seemed a little strange considering the fact that most 21st-century Christians associate the practice with medieval Christianity or with believers who appear to be a little extreme or fanatical.

But it was Jesus himself who said that when he, the Bridegroom, was taken away, that his followers would practice fasting (Mt. 9:15). And in the *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt. 6:2,5,16), Jesus did not say to his followers "if you give to the needy," "if you pray," and "if you fast," but "**when** you give to the needy," "**when** you pray," and "**when** you fast."

But as can happen with any spiritual discipline, more and more emphasis was placed upon the outward act of fasting without a corresponding change inwardly. For many people in the times after the apostles, fasting became the mark of piety and spirituality to be flaunted in front of others. Yet it was this very attitude that Jesus had spoken against in the *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt. 6:16f). There is always the danger that any spiritual exercise that is done habitually can become an empty form ... a mere ritual devoid of any spiritual content. The Church, in reacting against this abuse, "threw out the proverbial baby with the bath water." Instead of just getting rid of the abuses surrounding fasting, they got rid of fasting itself. It seems to me that the Church is just in the beginning stages of recovering the spiritual balance presented by the Scriptures regarding fasting.

The primary meaning of fasting is "not eating" (from the Greek *nesteuo*, meaning "not to eat"). The normal fast involves abstaining from all forms of food, but not from water. This was the type of fast our Lord experienced during the temptation in the wilderness (Luke 2:2). Scripture also gives us a few examples of what has been called the absolute fast. During this time a person abstains from drinking as well as from eating. Normally this was never for more than 3 days. We read of Ezra (10:6) and the Apostle

Paul (Acts 9:9), as well as the Jewish people when they were threatened with genocide during Queen Esther's rule (Esther 4:16), as participants in this kind of fast. From scripture we conclude that the absolute fast is an exceptional measure for an exceptional situation. It is something usually reserved for spiritual emergencies.

And then there is the partial fast, where a person either restricts themselves to certain foods, or omits a certain meal. Daniel and his companions went on this fast when they ate only vegetables and drank only water (Daniel 1:12), because the rich foods that had been offered them had first been offered to the Babylonian gods.

I want to insert a practical matter at this point. Fasting is **not** advised in certain situations. It should not be undertaken by diabetics, especially if insulin is in use. It is not advised for expectant mothers! Nor is it advisable for young children. If there is any doubt about one's fitness to fast, that person should seek medical advice.

In all that we do, we need to look at our motives. It is significant that in the first statement on the subject of fasting in the New Testament, Jesus deals with the question of motive (Mt. 6:16-18). God is not merely concerned with what we do but also why we do it. A right act may be robbed of all its value in the sight of God if it is done with a wrong motive. *"Why have we fasted, and you have not seen it?"* (58:3) asked the people of Isaiah's day. God's answer? *"On the day of your fasting, you do as you please..."*. The fasts they undertook, with all their show of piety, were motivated by self-interest and self-seeking. *"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen ...?"* asks God.

Even among those who accept fasting as a normal spiritual exercise, there is often so much emphasis on fasting for personal benefit, for receiving power, for specific answers to prayer, that the aspect **offasting unto God** has been lost. God's word came to Zechariah (7:5), *"Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted ... was it really for me that you fasted?'"* There is no suggestion that it is not right to seek these other things, but our underlying motives must first be right. *"Am I doing this to get something out of it, or am I doing it for the purpose of bringing glory to God?"*

Biblical fasting may be public as well as private. The year was 1863. The United States was being ripped apart by the Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln was in agony over the condition of the nation. And so he called the people together on Thursday April 30th to spend the entire day in fasting and prayer. In his official proclamation, this is what Lincoln said:

It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow ... The awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins ... Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity, and too proud to pray to the God that made us."

In times of special need and emergencies, God-fearing leaders like Abraham Lincoln have called their people together for prayer and fasting. When Britain was being threatened by an invasion from the French (Feb. 6, 1756), John Wesley recorded in his journal that the nation was called to *"a day of solemn fasting and prayer."* The invasion was averted. When Judah was invaded by a massive army, King Jehoshaphat called the nation to a fast (2 Chron. 20:1-4). What was God's response to this fast? *"This is what the Lord says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's'"* (vs. 15). And that was!! The city of Nineveh went on a public fast as a result of the prophet Jonah's preaching, and the city was saved from destruction (Jonah 3:10).

Another type of public fast is one called by the leaders of a church. If a church is experiencing times of confusion or division, if few people are coming to faith in Christ, if some are being seduced by the philosophies of men and pulled by the apparent attractiveness of the world around them, would not this be a time when leaders call that church to prayer and fasting? If a church is seeking God's direction for mission and outreach, is that not also a time to seek God's face in prayer and fasting? Scripture tells us that while the church at Antioch was worshipping the Lord and fasting (Acts 13:1-3), Barnabas and Saul were set apart by the Holy Spirit to begin their great missionary endeavor.

For the most part, a time of fasting and prayer is a private matter between you and your Lord. There are many situations that bring people to such a time. Maybe you need to **repent** - to turn around the direction of your life - from going your own way, to doing a 180 degree turn to go God's way. In the Old Testament, we often find people coming to God in a time of prayer and repentance with fasting. Or perhaps you need **direction** in your life. In a time of prayer and fasting God will often give you clarity of heart and mind regarding what He would like you to do. In I Samuel (1:7-8) we read of barren Hannah fasting and praying for a child. God answered with the birth of the prophet Samuel. We even see Abraham's servant involved in at least a partial fast when he is sent by Abraham to seek a bride for Isaac. Given the attacks upon marriages today, I would encourage you young people to seriously consider coming before God in a time of prayer and fasting before beginning to seek a spouse.

Another situation for prayer and fasting deals with people who are undergoing intense spiritual warfare that threatens to destroy their lives and relationships. God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, said: *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"* (58:6). We live in a world where it seems that an increasingly larger proportion of the younger generation are becoming bound by addictions of all sorts. Others have been deceived by the lies of Satan. Still others who are Christians are bound by fears, resentments, and unforgiveness. And God is telling us that fasting has a vital part to play in getting deliverance from the demonic forces that are hell-bent on our destruction. In the realm of the *"principalities and powers,"* there is a warfare that is going on for the souls, minds, and bodies of men and women, boys and girls everywhere. Fasting and prayer are powerful weapons, appointed by God, to break the enemy's hold.

I once received a letter from a friend in the pastoral ministry who wrote to me regarding some personal struggles he was facing: *"They've made me feel inadequate, restless and plain depressed. I fasted for several days with this matter in mind, asking God specifically to relieve me of such feelings. I think He has. This week-end will be my first experience of it since the fast. I'm eager to enter into it! Fasting has been a new venture for me recently. I discovered what many people already know, that Jesus promises to reward a fast, even in addition to prayer. He has done that for me. Especially with respect to inner healing, following a very difficult time in [and he lists the city]."*

In a time of prayer and fasting, I am confessing that there is a hungering in my soul that a Big Mac and fries cannot satisfy; I am confessing that there is a deep thirst which cannot be quenched by a Tim Horton's coffee or a Coke. I am confessing that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God (Mt. 4:4).

Before you begin a fast, especially a prolonged one, make sure your motives and aims are clear. And make sure that, whatever you hope to gain in health and healing, the glory of God and the spiritual issues at stake are your major concern.

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). AMEN.

CALL TO OFFERING

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The "Gazette," a Charleston, West Virginia newspaper, reported on a woman that when she has a few dollars to spare, tucks them away in her Bible. *"As I grow older,"* she said, *"I tend to forget where I put things. Now, when I say to myself, 'Where in heaven's name did I put that money?' the answer is obvious." *** Where, in heaven's name, are you putting your money? Is the answer obvious?