

February 5, 2017

Isaiah 58:3-9a:

***“Hey God! Don’t You See
What I’m Doing for You?!”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Old Testament Lesson was a lot about fasting. We know that fasting means to refrain from eating, but we often do not appreciate its spiritual significance. The *Small Catechism* of Luther talks about fasting as it related to the Sacrament of the Altar: “fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training” to prepare oneself to receive communion, but God does not command particular times, places, and forms for this, and no one should think that by fasting they will enter the kingdom of heaven. Luther took the practice for granted, and generally found it unnecessary to elaborate much on the subject, because it was a common practice among the Christians of his day. Perhaps few Lutheran Christians today even consider fasting as a regular part of their spiritual lives.

All of this begs the question: should we fast? Perhaps that is the wrong question. If we answer “yes” it ends up as a burdensome command, and if we say “no” then it will become one less thing to do and easily dismissed as unimportant. Perhaps it would simply be better to say that the Christian will naturally fast, or at least they will do a form of it from time to time, even though they may not necessarily recognize that what they are doing is a fast. Now, you cannot understand what I mean by that unless you understand what the heart of fasting is. And so, we need to make sure that we know what it means to fast.

The place to get a handle on fasting is in Matthew 9:14-15. There it says: “Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’” One thing is for sure, we are now living in the days when our bridegroom has been taken away from us. As any woman might long to be with her man, so do we yearn to be with our Lord. There are times as we are going through life when we are struck with an intense longing to get on with eternity; to the extent that we become rather disgusted with the normal fare of life. It is that moment when nothing sounds good except to go home to be with our Lord. This is the main aspect that captures the heart of fasting and its possible forms.

Another aspect to fasting consists of this: it can be a moment when you are waiting for such a long time for the bridegroom to come that you get caught up in everything else and are distracted by the wait, which then requires a focusing on what is important. As it says in another place in the gospel of Matthew (25:5): “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. *As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.*” As we wait, we tend to become drowsy, sleepy, distracted from what it is that we are waiting for, and so the sleeping that we tend to do needs to be disturbed. Consequently, we need to deny ourselves sleep so that we properly consider what it means to be spiritually awake.

Luther writes: “true fasting consists in the disciplining and restraining of your body, which pertains not only to eating, drinking, and sleeping, but also to your leisure, your pleasure, and to everything that may delight your body or that you do to provide for it and take care of it.” As we wait for our bridegroom, our predominant tendency is to lose ourselves in a quest that pursues down here like there is no tomorrow. Our tendency is to try to fill our emptiness inside with everything and anything other than a consideration our bridegroom and that which is to come. As we attempt to fill our appetites with all of the wrong things, we

demonstrate a lack of self-control and a need to discipline ourselves in such a way that our out of control nature is reigned in. With this in mind, we actively deny ourselves what we have come to love the most, in order that we can focus on the one who forever loves us through the cross and empty tomb. In Jesus' sacrifice, we sacrifice ourselves, and thereby embrace what is true and most important.

When we haven't eaten all day we often say that we are "starving to death." Of course, most of us have absolutely no idea what it is like to come close to such a thing, but that doesn't stop us from saying it. Whenever we throw God out and make ourselves and what we want the center of our lives, we are spiritually starving to death because we are without Christ who is real and eternal food. When we outwardly fast or deny ourselves anything for a short or long period of time, it is an exercise that reinforces the truth that what we need is something beyond what we have down here or in ourselves. It is at this point that we come to realize that our spiritual hunger and thirst can only be alleviated by Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins.

When we fast or deny ourselves certain things that are getting in the way of our relationship with God, we are starving to death our sinful nature. In doing so, we are acknowledging before God that our sinful desires must die. In such death, we are hungry for God and his gift of Christ. And having been emptied of ourselves we are told that, in the means of grace, Jesus lovingly dwells with us. Such fasting is only done by faith. In other words, the person who fasts or denies himself is one who is also clinging to everything that Christ has done through his life, suffering and death. Again Luther observes: "the only purpose of fasting is to discipline the body by outward cutting off both lust and the opportunity for lust, the same thing that faith does inwardly in the heart."

When we are no longer completely into ourselves, we are then able to consider God and our neighbor. It is no wonder then that in our text for this morning (Isaiah 58) a true fast is described as unloosing the bonds of wickedness, sharing your bread with the hungry, as a light breaking forth like the dawn, righteousness going before you, the glory of the Lord as your rear guard, calling on the Lord, and the Lord answering "Here I am!" This kind of a fast is a fast that is in faith toward Christ and necessarily bears the fruit of faith in good works of love toward God and neighbor. The attitude of our lives toward God and his word, as reflected in how we treat others in our lives, certainly is connected to how our requests to God are heard. Faith in his salvation is everything. The problem for the Israelites in our Old Testament lesson was that they didn't see it that way. Instead, they cried out to the Lord: "Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?"

Wow! The people had no idea what fasting really meant. They were fasting for all the wrong reasons. They really believed that the act of fasting was a cause for God to respond and do what they wanted him to do. It was as if they were saying: **Hey God! Don't You See What I'm Doing For You?!** This was the spiritual state of the Israelites in the time of Isaiah. They were working very hard to get God to notice and respond. Nevertheless, our Old Testament lesson teaches that it is not through empty externals that we somehow please God and make him do what we want.

We are susceptible to the same problem. We must be careful that we do not think of our bridegroom as the great gum-ball machine God. Like children putting a quarter in the machine, there is the expectation that the ball of gum is going to come rolling down. "If we just do our part, then God will do his part." And

that is not the truth at all, but just consider how often we live like that. When things do not go our way after we have gone to church regularly and have tried to do the right things, we tend to get indignant with God when he doesn't perform the way we think he should perform. **“Hey God! Don't You See What I'm Doing For You?!”** I put the quarter in the machine, where is my gum-ball?!”

For those of you who may not know Philip Melanchthon, he was an outstanding lay theologian and best friend of Luther. In his *Commonplaces of 1521*, he wrote this about the true nature of mankind apart from faith in Jesus Christ: “. . . we love nothing except what is advantageous to us. But God wants to be loved freely, not in view of what is advantageous. After all, he who loves advantage loves himself, not God. And how many times and in how many places do the Scriptures warn against this corrupt love.”

Melanchthon was not writing about Isaiah 58, but he might as well have, along with many other passages of Scripture. The point of our Old Testament lesson is that God is not the great gum-ball machine God, and it is never about **Hey God! Don't You See What I'm Doing For You?!** Instead, God wants us to love him no matter what. He wants us to love him as he loved us. As it says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . . if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, *we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ*, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:8-11).”

If God shows his love for us while we were sinners, if Christ died for us while we were enemies, how shall we live toward God? When we put what we happen to think is our quarter in the gum-ball machine, and no gum-ball comes out, how shall we respond? How shall we think of God when it might appear that he is our enemy - he who loved us even when we were real enemies who hated him? Paul says it. We *“rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* And that wipes out any notion of **Hey God! Don't You See What I'm Doing For You?!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott