

17 February 2021

**Writings: Fasting**

*Whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites (Matt. 6:16).*

You can tell a lot about a person by watching what they eat and how they do it. Some people eat only nutritious food because they are athletes in training and will measure what they consume to insure their body gets the proper amount of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins and minerals. Others eat only vegan or vegetarian food because they see it as a way to protect the environment and will only purchase certified non-animal products. Another group of individuals eat gourmet foods because they enjoy exploring different tastes and only buy items at speciality shops. Finally, there are those who eat a lot of fast food because it is convenient and will have eaten half their meal before returning home from the local burger place.

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples about how they should practice almsgiving, prayer and fasting. By doing so, he indicates what they do and how they do it says a lot about themselves.

During Christ's lifetime, fasting, along with almsgiving and prayer, were the three pillars of the spiritual life of most Jews. The Jewish Law required Jews to fast on two days each year. Fasting was also seen as a way to enhance the fervor of one's prayer life especially during times of duress. The practice was associated with a desire to show one's humility and vulnerability to God. It was occasionally used to make one aware of the conditions under which the poor lived and so encourage almsgiving.

While Jesus recognized the value of fasting, he also understood the importance of how it was done. If the practice drew attention to the effect it had on the individual, a change in physical strength, appearance or demeanor, its exterior dimension would be stressed. This emphasis could be enhanced through deliberate actions by the person. The net result would be that others would recognize and be impressed by the piety. Yet, if the practice focused on the meaning of the act itself, a desire to experience humility and vulnerability, its interior aspect would be highlighted. Deliberate actions by the individual to hide the effects of fasting would prevent others from knowing what was really happening. The net result would be that no one (other than God) would recognize or be impressed by the action. This emphasis on the meaning of the act, rather than its physical effects, would reveal as much about the disciple's attitude toward fasting as the athlete who carefully measures what he or she will consume does about their attitude towards food.

During this Covid 19 pandemic, followers of Jesus have many opportunities to practice almsgiving, prayer and fasting. We can donate non-perishable food or money to the St. Vincent DePaul Society to assist those struggling with food insecurity during this crisis. We can pray for those who have lost a loved one to the virus or help care for the elderly in Long Term Care institutions. We can fast to show our solidarity with those who have suffered the loss of a job or business during the pandemic and now face economic uncertainty. While such actions are fitting (especially during Lent) it might be wise to look at how we undertake them. If our emphasis is on external factors (how much we donate or how long we fast) we draw attention to ourselves. If our emphasis is on interior aspects (how we are all in this crisis together or how we are all facing things beyond our control) our stress is on the meaning of the action. The approach we choose tells others a lot about us.

It is easy to see how we are identified by such things as what we eat and how we eat it. We need to remember we are also identified not just by our faith practices but how we do them.

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