Pastor's Pen: The Tools of Lent: Fasting and Abstinence

As we continue through the season of Lent, we continue through the 'three legged stool' of the tools of Lent. The second leg is fasting and abstinence. Plainly defined: fasting is the act of limiting one's daily meals to either one regular meal or two smaller meals that together make one regular meal during a 24 hour period. . Abstinence is the act of willfully not using a favored good. Both have the design of establishing either a right usage of an item or the renouncing of something detrimental.

Both of these are difficult in our society. We are not just a consumer society but a wealthy society. The bottom 20% of the population in this country are better off than the overwhelming majorities of most nations. Our access to consumer goods is greater. Hence, it is a harder sell in this country of the good of fasting and abstinence. However, if ever a society needed to understand and implement fasting and abstinence, it is ours. Fasting and abstinence teach us the art of detachment from the things of this world. They teach us to master our appetites, desires, and habits. They are disciplines every bit necessary for spiritual health as exercise is for physical health.

The Benefits of Abstinence

Abstinence helps us in the right ordering of the hold material appetites and belongings have over us. It is the willful cutting back or eliminating of an appetite of a good for a period of time. Most often we associate abstinence with two particular appetites: sex and food. Certainly in our society both are tall orders. For sex, it is difficult when our entertainment is saturated in the misuse of human sexuality and the ready availability of pornography is epidemic. We refer to the right use of our sexuality as 'chastity', which is a form of abstaining from the use of our physical use of human sexuality in order to keep it in union with God's eternal plan for this particular good.

More often than not, though, we speak of abstaining from some food or drink item. During Lent, the practice of abstaining from meat is done. It is worth noting, that this call to abstain from meat is NOT limited to the Fridays of Lent, but outside of Lent one is permitted to eat meat as long as one gives up another item that will be an imposition on the person. The idea of abstinence being done on Fridays is a way of adding our own sufferings brought on by abstinence to the suffering of Christ crucified. It is a weekly reminder of what Jesus has done for us and how we are called in some way to treasure what He has done.

In our culture, however, abstaining from media (social and/or conventional) might be recommended by detaching ourselves from the regular diet of filth, violence, gossip, and other sinful behaviors we are called by our society to be entertained by. Reallocating that time wasted on being with family, spiritual reading, prayer, and other activities much more beneficial to us helps us to more command the time and energy we have to be of positive use. Too many times, our access to the media becomes an occasion of sin.

The Benefits of Fasting

Recently, I have seen many in the weight loss community praise the benefits of fasting as a way of regulating nutrition and diet. However, you can look that up on your own. Fasting, now regulated to only two times a year (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) historically has been an act of penitence for our sins. A good penance is meant to make us use our free will to put a good we have misused back to its original intent. Because fasting has a physiological effect other than hunger, namely in bringing clarity to the mind, it is seen as a useful tool in spiritual development. Fasting was much more common in the first nineteen centuries of the church. So prevalent was it that the early church had to forbid it on Sundays and solemnities.

Fasting is another powerful tool in the art of detachment from this world. It shares in the exercise of Jesus's forty days in the desert of a way of preparation for our engagement in God's will. As with abstinence, one can fast from other things than food. One can stay away from particular entertainments. But, the Scriptures bid us to fast from sinfulness, We read in Isaiah 58:6-7, " *Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house? Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh?"* Pope Francis talked about these same things as a proper fast. Recall, fasting brings about a greater clarity of the mind.

I spend much time talking about the core call we have to evangelize. Taking into account these powerful tools God gives us will help us conquer the fear we have in doing this task. I end with this quote from St. John Chrysostom:

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works.

- If you see a poor man, be moved to pity for him.
- If you see an enemy, be reconciled to him.
- If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him.

Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of your bodies.

- Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice and greed.
- Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin.
- Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful.
- Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip.
- Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism (slander, calumny, detraction).

For what good is it if we abstain from food, but bite and devour our brothers and sisters?"