



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

The Practice of Fasting

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 6:
16-18

Feb. 25, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Comfort was her first name and it fit. She was an exchange student from a sister seminary in Lagos, Nigeria. She was studying with us at Columbia Seminary. Some of you know that many persons from sub-saharan Africa have this deep, beautiful dark skin that almost has tints of blue. It is so stunning. Comfort also had this beautiful, broad smile that was warm and welcoming. I remember when I first met her and asked her how she was finding her time studying here in the United States, she said that when she was first shown her apartment on campus, she asked who else was sharing it with her. She could not believe all that space was just for her. She said she felt like a queen.

So, I knew something was wrong when I came to class and Comfort was already there with her head on the desk. I went to her and sat next to her and asked what had happened. And she looked at me with sad eyes and said that she received word that two young boys from her village in northern Nigeria had been badly beaten and one of them killed by some Muslim boys. They were going to church on that Sunday morning and they were carrying their Bibles. That's why they were attacked. She said she knew the boys. She had taught them in Sunday School. I told her I was so sorry to hear this. Then she sighed and said, "that is not all." She explained that when some Christians in her village heard this, they went and burned down three homes near the church that belonged to Muslim families. She said she knew two of the families personally. They were good people.

That conversation stays with me to this day. It reminds me that there are faithful Christians in other parts of the world who worship Jesus Christ at the risk of their lives. To follow Jesus, they make sacrifices every day.

That's an important part of what Lent is about. We are journeying with Jesus Christ to the cross. The 40 days of Lent recall the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. This Lenten journey—this following Jesus—has to mean something to us because there are children who are risking their lives, sacrificing their lives, to follow him.

Jesus says to us, "And whenever you fast..." not "if" you fast. Whenever you fast. "Do not look like the hypocrites." Do you remember last week when I told you that the word "hypocrite" comes from the Greek and the best translation is "street actor?" Jesus says, "for the hypocrites (the street actors) disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast (again, not 'if' you fast but 'when' you fast), put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who is in secret will reward you."

Jesus is talking about the tradition of fasting or refraining from eating. This is a common practice in Judaism. During the high holy days of Passover and Yom Kippur (the day of atonement), observant Jews fast. It is a common practice in Islam, too. Fasting during the month of Ramadan, which starts on March 11, is one of the five pillars of Islam. During daylight hours, those who can, refrain from eating and drinking. Christians also fast or refrain from eating during Lent. For us, the act of fasting, refraining from eating, has two primary purposes.

1) To express personal and communal repentance for sin. 2) In preparation to gain the faith and strength needed for a challenge or journey ahead. It's a sacrifice to give up eating for a specific period of time.

For about 25 years now, when we have a communion Sunday coming, I fast from Friday evening

through Sunday morning. So the first thing I eat in a day and a half is the bread of life when we take communion together. Honestly, I am more than a little reticent sharing this with you because Jesus tells us not to show off but when we fast, to do so in secret. But just like my prayer life, I want you to know how this practice has become so important to me.

This weekend, in preparation for communion next Sunday, the first Sunday of the month, I will do that again. I won't eat from Friday evening until Sunday morning when we share communion together. During that time, whenever I am hungry, I stop and pray. I pray for those in the world who are hungry. I pray for the people of Gaza, because they have no food and many are down to eating one meal a day. I pray for the Israeli hostages who are still being held by Hamas. I pray for the clients and our staff and volunteers at our Food Pantry. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says last year 10.8% of American households experienced food insecurity; 71% of those households have children in them.

Rev. Marjorie Thompson, who wrote the book "Soul Feast," reminds us that fasting is always about sacrifice but it does not always mean refraining from food.¹ I am mindful that some of us need to eat and it would not be healthy for us to fast.

There are other ways to fast. Dr. Thompson talks about activity fasts. Maybe you refrain from social media. Maybe you fast from consumerism—perhaps you do not buy anything.

Last year for Lent a woman in Dallas refrained from her habit of buying things daily on Amazon. At the end of the first week, her regular Amazon driver stopped by her home to see if she was okay.

I have a friend who is an avid sports fan and he fasts from viewing any sports on Saturday. It doesn't have to be on Saturday if that does not work for you.

Rev. Thompson says the goal of fasting is to give up anything that might be distracting us from focusing on our relationship with God. She writes that for Americans, in particular, it's easy for us to go through our days thinking we are in complete control. We really don't need God at all until a crisis comes and then we turn to God. God is always there, she notes. Our task is to recognize that and to be in relationship with God.

She suggests we fast from gossip or saying negative things about people. Maybe we fast from overpacking our schedules.

When we sacrifice, when we empty our lives so that we can focus on God, then we begin to hunger for the things that really matter. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled."

We are practicing Lent. I urge you to fast so that we might hunger for the things that matter. Then come to the table on Sunday for the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (1995).