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## Fasting and Feasting

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For almost fifty years, that's a LONG time in my way of thinking but it seems to have gone by in an instant!, I have taken the publication, "The Christian Century." I love what they put under the title of the magazine: "Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully."

This publication is likely the "flagship magazine" of mainline Protestantism in the United States. It comes out every other week and it reports on religious news; comments on theological, moral and cultural issues; and reviews books, movies, and music. I think most would consider this a "liberal magazine."

The Christian Century was founded in 1884 as a denominational magazine. It was the voice of the Disciples of Christ. In Iowa, of all places! At that time it was called "The Christian Oracle."

In 1900 the magazine moved to Chicago and was renamed "The Christian Century." You can think of that as an arrogant stance and some have so interpreted it - Christian triumphalism. Nothing could be further from the truth. It was a stance of the incredible optimism that followed World War I which was to be the war to end all wars. Many actually believed that. The editors of the magazine, some of the greatest theologians ever, believed that, and I'm quoting, "a genuine Christian faith could live in mutual harmony with the modern developments in science, technology, immigration, communication and culture." Those words - science, technology, immigration, communication and culture - don't have the same meaning today as they did in 1900.

The magazine did not do well. It was sold as part of a mortgage foreclosure in 1908 and bought by Charles Clayton Morrison. He made the magazine nondenominational. He was a highly influential spokesman for liberal Christianity. He advocated the highest standards in biblical scholarship and he was a social liberal. He was outspoken about child labor, women's rights to vote, racism, pacifism, environmentalism and many other political and social issues.

As you may or may not know or remember, it was in the early 1900s that Fundamentalism broke out and the Christian Century magazine was a favorite target of theirs. By the way, it was during this era that Harry Emerson Fosdick, a person who had a tremendous influence on the direction my professional life would take, preached a sermon titled, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" It reads as relevantly today as when it was first given. (Here is a link to that sermon - <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>)

I have read this magazine faithfully for decades. Periodically, maybe once a year or so, they would have a feature article by some prominent theologian/thinker. The article was titled "How I have Changed My Mind." At last twice that I know of these articles have been collected and published in a single book.

I bring all of this up for many reasons. I think you ought to know about this publication. That's one reason. Another is that changing one's mind is what the path of wise, useful, authentic spirituality is all about.

If you grew up in a religion and a culture as I did - I don't know about your religious background but I do know about your cultural background - where being right and certain was so central, to have one of your theological idols come forth with a piece that said, "I have changed my mind," was staggering!

I grew up with a "God-said-it-I-believe-it-that-settles-it!" mentality about everything. The goal was to be certain, sure. If not in religion, then in other areas: race, gender, region, economics. Beliefs and viewpoints were to be nailed down as certitudes.

Although I'm basing these talks on wisdom sayings found in the relatively recently discovered Gospel of Thomas, keeping data about the Jesus of History in mind is important. Jesus was not a Christian. He was, rather, a Jewish mystic whose desire was to reform his own religion.

He was not the only reformer of his time. Indeed, he was preceded by a wild man, John the Baptist, who was so outrageous in his opposition to the religious and political order that he got beheaded as a reward for his trouble. Jesus became his disciple for a while and, then, went off on his own.

According to the scholars the first thing Jesus did was to go off into the desert for a period of time to pray and fast. After that period of time, which Mark says is 40 days, a mystical number in Judaism, Jesus comes and begins his ministry by doing two things: calling people to follow him, that is to be disciples or students of his, and preaching that people should repent, that is change their minds.

Jesus was by himself during this period of time and he doesn't talk about himself in his teaching. Consequently, biblical scholars have had to distinguish between things Jesus actually said and things his followers said about him based on their experience with him.

None of the teachings of Jesus nor stories about him were written down for decades. The things that were preserved were done so by people whose lives had been transformed by their relationship with Jesus. That is what we are hoping for, right? Or, fearing. My God! What could this venture cost me?

How was this transformation they experienced possible? What produced such joy and love? Wouldn't you like some of that? To believe that you are just fine, that there is nourishment and safety for you in this world? That is basically what the teaching we are going to look at today is about.

Let me mention three things that they seemed to understand at a very visceral level.

First, their relationship to Jesus removed their fear of death. Somehow the message of Jesus, "Fear not, for I am with you" had gotten through to them.

Second, they were free of guilt. Each and every person in this room lives with some burden of remorse. We have, at times, difficulty, as some would put it, with "living with ourselves." Part of this is a result of the conditioning we got growing up.

It is how we organize our experience about what happens to us that makes us angry and fearful. The message Jesus gave to people, because he saw through their behavior to their being, was one I hope you get here. It was and is: "You are just fine. You may not have learned to act in wise and useful ways but we can use the

tools of psychology and spirituality to grow into the persons we truly are.” It is who we are in God that matters. Here is a bit of mystical, non-dual teaching: To know God is to know who God knows us to be.

This was the third wonderful thing that happened to those early disciples: they stepped outside the confining prisons of the ego.

When we are released from fear, guilt and self-centeredness, it is like being born again. Anyone who could release us from these things - fear, guilt and sin, we would easily call "savior." Not because he died for our sins but because he told us the truth about ourselves.

The way this happens, of course, is through the power of love. Jesus loved and his disciples got the message that they were loved. Rules and threats don't produce love. Doctrines don't produce love. Only love produces love. The early Christians were changed by feeling certain that they were totally loved by the divine power behind the universe.

At any rate, they created a story that frames their experience of the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus. The story is about Jesus being tempted by Satan and though you likely know it, and I have talked about it before in here, it provides a crucial frame for the teaching today.

According to the story, Satan tempts Jesus three times and each temptation begins with the same words, “If you are the son of God . . .” What causes us to fall off the spiritual path is the loss of our true identity.

(Though these are my words, my thinking is influenced by something I heard Richard Rohr say years ago.)

The first temptation is where Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread. This is temptation to the need to be effective, successful, relevant, to make things happen. I'm not saying that being these things is wrong. I am saying that the need to be these things in the eyes of people is a distraction from being faithful to who you are.

Crowd approval is a risky thing. Usually when we buy into that too quickly, we are feeding the ego and the very system Jesus went up against. God's will for this earth is not a matter of popular vote. Spiritual work is about moving beyond what we want to what we need.

I think, for example, how much of the church's worship has gone astray today because of the need to be relevant. The worship service of many churches has been dramatically affected by the need to be "relevant." I drive by churches and they have signs advertising their services: "Traditional worship at 11 - Contemporary worship at 9:45." Is this to imply that tradition worship is not or cannot be contemporary?

"It is not by bread alone that we live."

The second temptation of Jesus: Satan takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple, symbolizing the religious world, and tells him to play righteousness games with God. "Throw yourself off and he'll catch you." It's the only time when Satan quotes Scripture.

The second temptation is the need to be right. It is the: "I'm saved and, poor you, you're not. My truth is THE truth and the pathetic opinion you hold is so wrong."

If a religion or religious belief causes one to feel superior, morally elite being able to quote Scripture for our own purpose and to further our own agenda, we've fallen for this one.

More evil has come into the world by people of righteous ignorance than by people who've intentionally sinned. Religious ignorance is reflected when anyone is convinced that he or she has the whole truth and has God wrapped up in my denomination, my dogmas and my right response: I am baptized, I made a personal decision for Jesus, I go to church, I hate abortionists and gays, and the like.

Again, there is nothing wrong with being "right." By "right" I mean being in line with the latest understanding and insights from all disciples about the subject at hand. The spiritual problem is the need to be right. We are called to do the truth and then let go of the consequences.

The question is not first what do we have to do or believe but who are we? If we answer that our God is the God of Jesus then the doing and believing pretty much take care of themselves.

As Mother Teresa loved to say, "We were not created to be successful but to be obedient." True obedience to God won't always make us look or feel right.

The third temptation Jesus faced is seen our need for control or power. So the devil tells Jesus to bow down before the systems of this world: "All of them you can have."

This is the temptation to buy into the power structure. Believe whatever the authorities tell you. Jesus refuses to bow down before the little kingdoms of this world, the corporations and the nation-states, the security systems, the idols of militarism. The price of this love of power is to "fall at Satan's feet and worship him!"

Again, these are not my words. Read the teaching of Jesus. In his words there is a very heavy judgment on "all the kingdoms of the world." In all these systems, self-interest has to dominate. For Kingdom people, self-interest cannot dominate.

Simply put, the third temptation is the need to be in control, to be aligned with power and money.

The three temptations that Jesus faces, in a certain sense, all become one: the addictive system, the great lie, the untouchable mythology, "the sin of the world" that must be unmasked and dethroned.

I know nothing strong enough to break the mythology - not ideology, not liberalism, not conservatism, nothing except the upside-down gospel of Jesus.

Jesus tells Satan, "You must worship the Lord your God, and serve God alone."

When we have faced these three big temptations to get off the journey that is the return to the center, what is called "Satan" doesn't have a chance.

When it comes to wise and useful spirituality and religion all that really matters is that we get up in the morning and have some way to remind ourselves who we really are and then live that.

When it comes to following Jesus and his teachings, there is nothing to attain, just to realize.

Our work is to understand what blocks our sense of being who we truly are. Why are we so exiled from our true identity? If to know God is to know that we are known, if to know God is to know who God knows us to be, how can we join God in this knowing?

You know, just to be able to get up in the morning and put our feet on the floor and get a cup of coffee or a drink of water is a gift of such incalculable value. There were over 150,000 people on this planet who didn't get up today. Some of them had big plans too.

I'm not saying you have to have a spiritual practice. I am saying that without one, you're likely to miss this identity business. Nor am I saying it is easy. Every day we have to start all over again. Every day we get to start all over again.

How do we do that?

That's a trick question isn't it? I mean, if it is not something we attain but, rather, realize, what do we do? Jesus disciples were always asking that and he gave them responses that make your brain sore. Here is the teaching for today's talk. I hope when you hear it, it will make what I've said so far make sense.

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Yeshua says,

If you do not fast from the cosmos,  
you will never grasp Reality.  
If you cannot find rest

on the day of rest,  
you will never feast  
your eyes on God.

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Jesus went into the desert and was tempted to succumb to the ways of the world. He fasted from the world. That's what the word "cosmos" means here.

We have to turn our attention from the outside to the inside. This, getting back to primal state - this is the world and ourselves as originally intended - is not just the focus of Jewish mysticism or Jesus. It is what I call "wise, useful and authentic" spirituality and religion is about. In Buddhism as well as in mystical Christianity, it is called the practice of non-attachment. Because we are studying the teachings of a radical Jewish mystic, we'll stay with the Jewish mind-set here.

My judgment or evaluation is that this fasting from the world and observing a true Sabbath rest comprise a task that is growing more and more difficult as each day passes.

In Jewish mythology - and please remember a myth is something that is truer than true - in Jewish mythology the creation story was central. Actually, there are two creation stories but we'll conflate them for now. There was a pristine state and there was a pattern to follow. God created and, then, God rested. God created humans in God's image. Human's, made in God's image, were to behave like God and have a period of rest in their lives.

One of what we call "The Ten Commandments" - and again, there are varying lists in the Hebrew Scriptures - clearly states: Honor the Sabbath. In the teaching for today Jesus clearly says, "If you cannot find rest on the day of rest, you will never feast your eyes on God."

I believe this is a teaching of Jesus. I believe he meant it. Yet, you could say that it was for not observing the Sabbath that he was executed.



Richard Rohr says that it is as if, when you read the Jesus story, that he lay around in a hammock for six days of the week, going to weddings, feasts and turning water into wine and, then, on the Sabbath he gets up and gets to work, mostly healing people and forgiving sins. He himself clearly violates the Sabbath. So, what is going on here?

The Jewish law clearly states that one day a week was to be set aside to think about and worship God and religious and spiritual matters and refrain from work. Of course, you know that no law can make a person spiritual or give a person faith. No law can make us love our neighbor. Laws can, of course, stress the importance of justice. By the way, if you go back and read the Hebrew law, everybody was to have a day off. Everybody. Even then, especially then, the sacredness of the individual was stressed.

I think it might be helpful that rather than seeing this as a rule or regulation, to see it as a principle - like fasting. One of the fundamental needs of the Self is rest. "Rest" is not the same as a nap. In the beginning the Sabbath was not only a day of no work, it was also a day of Sacred Remembering. For Jews it was: we had been enslaved, we have been set free, we work and, then, we rest and remember.

But, it didn't stay that way. When the Jews, because of political repression, were driven in upon themselves, they started to study their own laws under the microscope. They began to be dissatisfied with principles and insist upon rules and regulations to cover every conceivable event that might happen to a person. There came a passion for this.

Nowhere in the history of Jewish law is this more evident than in this business of honoring the Sabbath. For example, you couldn't carry a burden on the Sabbath. Well, what's a burden? Is a child a burden? No. So you could pick up a child. You couldn't pick up a rock, though. Nor, could you pick up a child if the child was holding a rock. What, then, is a rock. And on and on.

It was this kind of well-intentioned nonsense that infuriated Jesus. So he said, mostly he acted this out by what he did, "You've got it all wrong. You have made a superstition out of something that is supposed to be Sacred."

Well, that frightened many folks - especially those who had not fasted from the world. They were so much like we are. They wanted to stick to the things they were accustomed to because they were emotionally committed to them and they didn't have the spiritual courage to break away. So, Jesus goes around saying things like, "Yes, Moses said to you . . . but I say . . ."

It was if he deliberately went out of his way to irritate them about this matter. He called them stupid, said they couldn't think for themselves, that they were a bunch of hypocrites, he deliberately broke the law about the Sabbath by healing people. The "religious" people hated Jesus for this.

Just abstaining from work on Sunday, or Saturday the true Sabbath, is not going to make a person spiritual. An idle Sunday or Saturday is of no more spiritual value than an idle Thursday. So, what does it mean to have a "Sabbath rest"?

With the usual caveat that you cannot put non-dual teaching into language, here is a go at it. Like God, we are to build a new creation to live in. We do this anyway. We create the world in which we live, our experience of it anyway, by our beliefs and practices. The world we are to create is one where we develop the awareness that God is everywhere and in everyone. No fear, doubt, inadequacy, opposition competition, not even death can overcome this Sacred Mystery. Our task is to build a new consciousness of this and then - leave it alone. That's the Sabbath rest. You cannot violate this principle and have life anymore than you can violate any of the other principles - like murder, adultery, stealing and so forth - and have life.

You plant a seed and let it be. If you dig the plant up every day to see how it is doing, it will kill it. That's Sabbath rest.

Sacred Mystery is all about but we are often blind to it so we don't enjoy the feast.

I read of an experiment where a wall-eyed pike is put into an aquarium. He is fed for some days with little minnows. Then, in the middle of the experiment, a glass partition is placed down in the middle of the aquarium so that the pike is now confined to one side.

Then the researchers drop the minnows on the other side. Immediately, the pike goes for the minnows, but he hits himself against the glass. He circles and hits it again. He keeps this up but now he hits the glass a little less hard. After a few more times, he's just sort of nosing up against the glass. He begins to get the idea that he is never going to get those minnows. Pretty soon he starts ignoring them all together.

At that point, those doing the experiment take out the glass. The minnows come right up against the gills of the pike and he doesn't even try to get them. He's convinced he's not going to get those minnows, so there's no point in wasting his time or hurting his nose again.

Without the willingness, ability, trust to see the Sacred everywhere and in everyone we starve in the midst of plenty when we could be feasting.

Fasting and feasting, they go together.

Planting and reaping, they go together.

Not only do they go together, in the world of non-duality they are the same.

A Buddhist monk, a priest and a rabbi were attending an interfaith gathering. It was night time. All of a sudden the lights went out. The Buddhist monk takes advantage of this opportunity to teach the value of using the dark to meditate. The priest gives a homily about how Jesus is a light to illuminate our way on life's sometimes dark path. The rabbi goes and gets a flashlight.

Jesus was a Jew, a Jewish mystic, and much of his way of approaching life was like that of the rabbi. He does what is practical and what makes sense in the world where he lived even if it goes against the rules and regulations, against the cultural expectation and religious laws of the time.

In order to move into the world Jesus saw and taught about one has to risk the loss of beliefs and certitude. One of the first things I learned from Richard Rohr is that there are two doors we can go through into the realm of non-duality or what Jesus

called “the rule of God.” One door is that of spiritual practice. The other door is that of great suffering or loss. No one goes willingly through either.

Look around and you will see that bad religion - that is, selfish piety, thin morality and private purity - will guarantee bad economics and bad politics. It results in an unworkable world driven by greed and fear and violence. This is what we need to fast from.

I’m not saying we don’t have to play by the rules. We do. What I am saying is that the rules we have made up are not the ones to play by. The religious leaders went to Jesus and said, “You and your guys are not playing by the rules.” He said, “Really? I don’t think you know what the rules really are. Here are the rules that lead to life: Repent - Change your mind. Love God. Love your neighbor. Fast from the world. Feast on Sacred Mystery.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.