

Matthew 9:14-17 [NIV]

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁵ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

¹⁶ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. ¹⁷ Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

We're in Matthew, Chapter 9, this morning if you'd care to turn there in your Bible.

Considering the virus, we thought it wise that everyone should have their own hymnals and black notebooks to sing from. But we couldn't fit the Bibles and both songbooks in the racks under the seats, so we took out the Bibles. And that's fine since we've made the decision that we're no longer going to preach from the Bible, but instead from this book, *The World According to Mr. Rogers*, since it's thinner and fits in the rack!

Of course, I'm kidding! To relocate the Bibles is just a temporary, logistical decision we made since we figured that probably just about *everybody* has a Bible at home which they can bring with them to worship, but probably just about *nobody* has a *hymnal* at home that they can bring with them.

Just the same, if you don't happen to have a Bible, there are some in the foyer at the Welcome Center, although we may find a shelf of some kind for next week, so we'll have them right at the back of the sanctuary there. Today, though, they're in the foyer for you to borrow — you can even take it with you if you need one.

But truly, bringing your own Bible is always encouraged, so you can make notes in it about what God is saying to you.

Also, out in the foyer today, in addition to Bibles and in addition to the *Bible Reading Guides* for this year, are the Old and New Testament Scavenger Hunts for kids, the new Church Directories and a few other things. There are paper copies of the statement given by our Free Methodist bishops in response to the events of the January 6th [A Letter of Pastoral Guidance from the Board of Bishops, January 10, 2021]. We've sent that through Prayer Notes and News a couple of times this week, but we wanted to have paper copies available, too.

Let me just say that to make a statement at all, about, honestly just about anything is a perilous thing to do in these days. When I sat down to begin today's message, I looked down at the floor beside my chair at home and there was this sticker that says "Purgatory."

It's from our vacation a couple years ago. Paul and I mountain biked in Durango at Purgatory Mountain

Resort. But as I sat down to write and saw that sticker, I thought, "Yep, purgatory is about what it's like to try to say anything in this highly charged, reactionary environment in which we are living.

So, with regard to the Bishops' Statement, I'd encourage you to read it for what it says and avoid reading into it things it doesn't say. I mean, no matter which way you lean politically, there are things any one of us might have added, subtracted or just put a little differently.

Overall, though, if we can read it as we would have maybe 11 or 12 months ago, before the combination of politics and Covid-19 turned our national toxicity up so high, I think you'd find very lucid and Scriptural counsel about a number of things:

- about how we find, process and discuss information,
- about how we interact with others — our brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly,
- about avoiding making untrue assumptions and reactionary behavior,
- about seeking out and standing for truth,
- about admitting error,
- about how, as a church, we fully support and even encourage debate and protest — but never the kind that descends into violence, and on and on.

So, it's there for our edification and encouragement, as the Lord would use it.

The part of it that I want to comment on today, though, is their call to the church to a time of prayer and *fasting* for the healing of the divisions in our nation and for truth and justice to prevail in all that is going on.

Now, some of you would say, "You're just choosing the safe ground," because some of you want me to talk more about politics and economics and all that.

Others of you think I've said too much about all that already; you don't want to come to church and hear all the political stuff.

So, you see, it's as I said: no matter what statement you might try to make in these super-sensitive, hyper-reactive days, some will jump to conclusions and make assumptions, and you're going to be wrong in someone's eyes.

We all probably need to stand down a little bit and offer more grace.

But the fact is, our engaging the Lord for the sake of peace and truth and justice really is about the most important thing we can do.

Theology, Bible study, sermons, Sunday school lessons: none of that is worth much if it doesn't engage the world where the world is. And right now, our world is an angry, disingenuous, untrusting, jumbled mess. And if humanity has proven anything, we've

proven that, left to our own devices, we can't fix it. We can't save ourselves.

I see our nation very much like a marriage that has come to a violent crisis point. It did not get in that condition overnight; rather, it's been heading there for a long time – the result of years and years of poor behavior, mistrust and the piling up of layers and layers of unresolved issues.

And, just like that broken marriage, all of that is not going to be healed quickly.

But, for any sort of healing to happen, we have to be open to, and *not* just *open* to, we have to *want* and *invite God's engagement* in the mess. We have to *want* God's Word and principles and correction applied, *not just to those who disagree with us, but to ourselves.*

"Our marriage is broken and it's *all her* fault."

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I can't tell you how many times I've heard that from couples, and I promise you it is *exactly never* true.

And unless both people are open to seeing and embracing their responsibility in the conflict they've created, that relationship will never be healthy.

The same is true for sibling relationships, for parent/kid relationships; it's true about disagreements between friends and co-workers.

And, it is true for political parties, and even between races.

Now, I'm not saying there's no such thing as truth and lies, or good or bad – there certainly is.

I'm just saying you never get to healing by demanding that the other person gets fixed.

Healing requires hearts on all sides to be open to see and to hear and to change, all in the context of – all motivated by agape love – self-giving love: love that's as concerned about the well-being and health and good of the other as it is about its own.

This is where the rubber hits the road in faith and life. This is where theology and human relationship intersects – and especially in our day, you see?

Self-giving love.

It's not just nice-sounding, Bible-story, Sunday-school theory anymore.

When a marriage is in crisis, this is the cure.

And when a nation is in crisis, this is the cure.

And, to borrow a metaphor from these days, it's up to the church to give the vaccine to the nation. The government is never going to give it: it can't give it, and it doesn't have it to give.

God has filled His divine syringe with this agape love – His love. It's the love for others that brought Jesus to earth, and it's the love that Christians are to have for each other, so that the world could look to Christ-followers and say, "Man, look at them. Look how they get along. They have their differences, because I know those two guys and they disagree about tons of stuff, but they're still able to get along and to trust each other and to joke with each other and to eat together and go on vacation together and discuss things without winding up hating each other. How do they do that?"

And when they ask that question, that's when we have the ability to say, "Well, let me tell you about this guy named Jesus – and what He did..."

And then, should they so choose, they get the vaccine too.

And that's how the world changes. That's how God's Kingdom comes. That's how the world heals. And that's why the Church, Jesus said, is a city on a hill and a light in the darkness. The Church – the body of Christ – has the power to change the world, if we'll use it.

Which is why I say, the most important part of that Bishops' document may well be the call for the church to engage God for the healing of the divisions in our nation and for truth and justice to prevail in all that is going on.

But here's the thing: even if we'll pray along those lines, God will probably not just zap it done.

Now it's true: He's done that from time to time in history.

But the vast majority of the time, when someone asks God to act, God typically turns around and acts in that very person's life to such a degree that that person becomes the agent of the very healing that they asked God to do.

Very typically, God uses *us* to answer our *own* prayers, and *especially* prayers for *peace* and *unity* and *justice* and *truth* and all that. You know that is true, and if we are honest, it can even be quite frustrating, because when we pray for those things, what's in our mind is usually something like, "Hey God, why don't you shine your spotlight on those jerks over there and show them how wrong they are?"

But you know very well how God typically responds to that sort of sentiment of prayer. He typically takes that spotlight of His and turns it around and shines it right back in our own faces, so we can deal with the jerk right here.

The fact is, that's what prayer usually does: it offers God the opportunity to point out things in us that need to be changed,

so that we might be more open to Him,

so He can pour more of His love – agape love, self-giving love – into us,

so we wind up looking and acting more like Jesus, so those prayers of ours can be answered.

And that's precisely why prayer is not always that popular, even in the church: because we like ourselves and our biases and our presumptions, and we don't want to change.

And we know that when we pray, more likely than not, God has surgery planned for us.

That's what prayer is: putting ourselves in a position to hear God speak. It's putting ourselves on the block and saying, "OK, God, have at me."

And then, once we've done that and heard Him, we have to decide to do we said – not about them, but about us.

That's always where healing begins.

And fasting only enhances that sort of prayer, which may be why it's even less popular than prayer itself.

Now, fasting is interesting.

You see Israel practicing it quite a lot in the Old Testament, as a means of showing their sorrow for their sin and trying to avoid God's judgment.¹ To the Jew, the three greatest works of the spiritual life were prayer, giving to the poor, and fasting.

But you don't see fasting referred to all that much in the New Testament.

John the Baptist and his disciples practiced it,² and so did the Pharisees and other Jews of Jesus' day.³

According to the Didache, which is the oldest Christian catechism we have – from the first century, Christians were encouraged to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, apparently since Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays.

They didn't want to be confused with Pharisees.

Some today think fasting is no longer necessary, since we live in the age of the Holy Spirit. They would say that the Spirit is the new wine that shouldn't be put in the old skins of the past, which is what they would consider fasting to be.

But most disagree, not only because Jesus fasted Himself – in the desert when He was being tempted, but He also taught proper fasting in Matthew 6, the essence of which was, "don't fast in ways that exalt yourself – that's totally insincere and misses the whole point."

And, Jesus says in our text this morning that although it would be improper for His disciples to fast while He was with them, they would certainly fast, as part of prayer, once He's gone.

Now, it's impossible to present a theology of fasting in the time left.

There are tons of stuff online about fasting, but then again, there are tons of stuff online about Area 51 and three-headed Martians and how Norwegian tuna fishermen are secretly out to take over the world, so be careful what you embrace from the internet.

Personally, I would send you toward Richard Foster's book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, or what Maxie Dunnam or even John Wesley has written on it.

Wesley encouraged those in Jesus' camp to fast – *with* certain understandings about its extremes. He wrote, "Some have exalted (fasting) beyond all Scripture and reason; and others utterly disregard it. Some speak of it as if it were all – others as if it were nothing."

He wound up concluding: "Fasting is not the end, but it is a precious means toward the end; a means which God himself has ordained, and in which therefore, when it is duly used, He will surely give His blessing."⁴

Of course, fasting is far more than just denying ourselves food for a time. In the context of prayer, fasting is actually choosing to act out Jesus' statement that, "we do not live by bread alone." Fasting is our

admission that we do not exist by earthly things alone, but rather we, as Christ-followers, are completely dependent on God, and so we deliberately choose weakness so that God might show His strength through us.

Maxie Dunnam puts it this way – he writes, "Fasting is but one way of humbly admitting to God, 'God, we fully realize that we're in a mess, and that we can't fix it and that we need you to get us through it.'"

So, practically speaking, as we fast, every time we feel that pang of hunger, we are choosing to remind ourselves that we are taking our hands off of this – we're giving this circumstance to God and that we're asking for His will and way to prevail.

Which brings up another big point here: prayer, and any fasting that goes along with it, is never about making God do what we want.

That's what the pagan prophets of Baal did on Mount Carmel – in their dancing around and yelling out and slashing themselves with swords and all that.

That's not the way of the Living God.

Prayer is about opening ourselves to what God wants – and being willing for Him to show us our part in bringing it to be.

It's saying, "OK Lord, here I am. I am putting, not someone else, I'm putting myself on the block here. I'm putting myself on Your operating table, and I'm inviting you to do your surgery – to shine your light, *not* on *them* over *there*, but on *me* right *here*, so that I might be different – so that I might have your love to share – to accomplish your purposes, to draw people to you, to redeem your world."

And fasting is God's invitation to us to bring that reality to mind and heart even more powerfully.

Friends, on this week in particular, I don't have to tell you, we are in a mess.

The world is divided and angry.

The nation is divided and angry.

Our governments are divided and angry.

Families are divided and angry.

Friends are divided and angry.

And the Church has the vaccine for division and anger. But in far too many places, it's not offering it to the world, because in far too many places, the Church itself is divided and angry.

In those places, the Church is following the way of Israel, who did not live up to what God created her to be: a blessing to the nations – to reveal God to the world around.

God wants His Church to do and to be the very same: a blessing to the world in these days. And He's given us the cure to what ails us: the vaccine of self-giving, agape love.

But we'll never be able to administer it if we don't take it ourselves.

How many times has 2 Chronicles 7:14 been quoted in the Church in the last decade or so?

¹ 2 Sam 12:16-23

² Matthew 11:18

³ Luke 2:37; 11:12

⁴ Upon Our Lord's Sermon On the Mount, Discourse Seven

The verse where God says, *“If my people... will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”*

Notice how there’s nothing in there about asserting ourselves or our solutions or our will or our way. There’s nothing in there about God zapping the *jerks* over *there*.

On the contrary, what God is saying is: *if we will humble ourselves* – if we’ll admit, “God we’re in a mess, and we cannot fix this on our own.”

If we will humble ourselves and pray – if we will lay ourselves on God’s block and let Him shine His light on us and ask Him, not to fix the jerk over there, but the jerk here on the table.

If we will humble ourselves and pray and seek God’s face – if we’ll admit to God, “We think we know the way, but the fact is, we really don’t know if our way is Your way in this or not, so we put our way away for the sake of Your way. God, would you have Your way? Would show us Your way?”

You see, all of this so far is about our decision to *put ourselves in a position to hear God speak*.

And then, God says that *if we will do all that – if we will humble ourselves and pray and seek God’s face and turn from our wicked ways* – again, not *their* wicked ways. No – *our* wicked ways.

This is now deciding to act on what we’ve heard God say, and that’s when He moves and makes changes here [point to heart] in our hearts, so changes can then be made here [point to mouth] in our words and here [hold up hands] in our actions, all of which God uses to make changes there [gesture outward] in our world.

I believe that’s what Scripture says praying and fasting is about, and that’s why our leaders call us to it.

And let me say, we don’t have to make some big, public deal about it. In fact, Jesus explicitly says not to.

Fasting is not a matter of show.

Fasting is a matter of soul: our soul before God, and in this case, for the soul of our nation.

We are in a mess, and it is one that only God can fix.

The great news is, God can fix it. He really can, and He even wants to use us to do it.

But He can’t use us, unless we’ll do it His way.

So, I think that’s what He wants to know from each of us this morning: will we do it His way?

Will we pray – and maybe fast, laying ourselves on God’s table, so He can have His way with us?

Prayer:

Lord, we admit that we are in a mess. Our nation is in a mess. And, we all admit that we think our way forward is best. Why would we think it, if we didn’t think that?

So, Lord, maybe we haven’t been all that willing or even interested. Maybe we haven’t thought we needed it: to lay ourselves before you to pray and fast.

Sure, for other people, for the mess they’re making, but not for us.

So, Lord, for all those praying right now, speaking for all of those here, who in their souls, in their spirits, are nodding in agreement, “Yeah, I’ve done that, and I shouldn’t do that. I need to know what God has for me.”

Lord, we lay ourselves upon Your block, on Your operating table.

And, as uncomfortable as it is, we welcome You to shine that light, that bright light, into the depths of who we are.

And help us to be not so concerned about what You’re doing with them over there; not nearly as concerned as we are with what You want to do with us right here.

Help us to be that open with You and that honest with You, so that You make of us a part of Your body, a part of Your church that is not in division and not in discord, speaking truth in love and being an instrument of Your kind of peace.

Would you do that? In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Song: *Instruments of Your Peace*

Benediction:

One more thing that Wesley wrote: “Let our intention in fasting (and in all things related to prayer) be this:

to have our eye on God and God alone;

to glorify our Father;

to express our sorrow and shame for our many sins against Him and His law;

to anticipate His giving to us His purifying grace;

to draw our attentions and love, not to the things of earth but the things above;

to add seriousness and earnestness to our prayers;

to avert the wrath of God;

and to obtain all the great and precious promises which He’s made to us in Jesus Christ.”

Let’s seek God and His way – for us and our nation, so that in His love and by His Spirit we might be a blessing to our world.