



Fast, Give Alms, Pray

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Ash Wednesday, February 6, 2008*

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they 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, 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 sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

When you fast, when you give alms, when you pray. Jesus spoke of these things; so shall I.

He'd grown up in Manhattan and she in the Midwest, so affluent suburban Fairfield County was new terrain for Keith and his family. Commenting on their new life early on, I recall Keith marveling at the speed with which curiosities became desires and desires became needs. He was speaking of sailboats and SUVs and houses with additional bedrooms. Little did he know how much he needed a sailboat. In the past he hadn't given much thought to sailboats; when he arrived in Rowayton he admired them; soon he found himself striving to acquire one.

I'm aware that so often I purchase things on impulse. The forces of society seem to know this about me and thus conspire to capitalize on my weakness by parading a display of alluring, if unnecessary—sometimes even worthless—commodities before me to which I too easily succumb. I consume because it is there. I eat because it is dinner time.

Long ago ancestors of mine knew terrible hunger, as do countless millions around the globe today, but hunger—I am fortunate to report—is not something with which I am intimately familiar. For those without, hunger is a terrible, terrifying beast. But for those of us accustomed to filling our bellies promptly, the experience of hunger is an occasion for considering anew what it is we truly need to sustain us in this life, an occasion to reflect upon what sort of bread will ultimately satisfy and give us life.

Fasting—intentionally going without—awakens our longing, not only for the food that will fill our bellies; also awakens our longing for the food that will nourish our souls. Jesus said “blessed are the poor,” or “blessed are the poor in Spirit”—one according to Luke, the other to Matthew. Many believe that by this Jesus suggests “blessed are those who know their own hunger and need.” For the rich who are able to numb themselves with a steady feast of consumption cannot know their own hunger and need—even their own hunger and need for God.

Now fasting in itself will not make us right with God, but it is one of the tangible things that we can do to nourish the life of the Spirit, for through fasting we know ourselves to be hungry for God. Martin Laird* writes that “contemplative practice is a skill, a discipline that . . . does not have the capacity to determine an outcome. A gardener, for example, does not actually grow plants. The gardener practices finely honed skills, such as cultivating soil, watering, feeding, weeding, pruning. But there is nothing the gardener can do to make the plants grow. However, if the gardener does not do what a gardener is supposed to do, the plants are not as likely to flourish. In fact they may not grow at all.” Thus might we try fasting.

Do you know that experience of seeing a stranger—in a waiting room maybe—and you fabricate an entire life for them, conjuring up images of their predicament. It’s remarkable how quickly we can do that. In the time it takes me to walk a quarter of a block, I can come up with all sorts of stuff about the scruffy young man on the corner sitting on his milk crate pathetically pleading for some spare change. I can make assumptions about his dependence on alcohol or drugs, about his proclivity to be a parasite leeching off—rather than being a constructive, hard-working member—of society.

Actually my imagination is working double time because I’m simultaneously rewriting the story of my present expedition down the street, often including details about how busy I am and how necessary it is that I not be late. Why all this energy expended on needless fantasy? Because now, by the time I travel the quarter of a block, I am fully justified in breezing by the scruffy young man with nary a glance or acknowledgment.

Every night for six months out of the year, for two years, it was my job to direct a shelter for homeless men in Paterson New Jersey. I learned many things from those men. I learned that one of the most painful aspects of being homeless is that it makes you invisible. Even though you think you are in fact sitting on a street corner attempting to engage the passersby, you discover that you are not even there, because with stunning consistency they breeze by you with nary a glance. The men told me that what they appreciate—even as much as the spare change or something to eat or more substantial assistance—is being seen, being noticed, the gift of acknowledgment. Even to have someone pause, look you in the eye, and say “I cannot or will not help today” is preferable to being treated as invisible.

When you give alms, when you and I pause, as so many of you do when you assist in the Food Cupboard, and we ask something simple and open-ended—“How are you today?”—or some such, we make a connection, we acknowledge relationship. Not only do we see that other person in a new way, we likely see ourselves in a new way too. What we see does not necessarily make us feel comfortable or good, often quite the opposite, but it is real, substantive, poignant; it is not a fanciful fabrication; it is something nearer to the truth about the brokenness and needs of people in our society and the connectedness we all share—acknowledged or not. To love our neighbor as ourselves requires we first see our neighbor.

Now alms-giving in itself will not make us right with God, but it is one of the tangible things that we can do to nourish the life of the Spirit, for through alms-giving we know ourselves related to all others. “Contemplative practice is . . . a discipline that facilitates a process that is out of one’s direct control; it does not have the capacity to determine an outcome,” writes Martin Laird. “In the same way [as a gardener] a sailor exercises considerable skill in sailing a boat. But nothing the sailor does can produce the wind that moves the boat. Yet without the sailing skills that harness the wind, the boat will move aimlessly.” Thus might we give alms.

I am glad you’re here today. I am glad for you, for your sake, that you’re here, that you’ve given yourself this time. I know you are busy; you probably have quite a few things you intend to accomplish today. It feels good to be busy. We all enjoy vacation when we have it, but truth be told, most of the time we’re glad to be busy. Being busy means that I have a job to do, a role to play, a sense of purpose, ambition, goals. Being busy probably means that somebody is dependent on me—a family member or colleague at work. Actually, we treat busyness as a sign of stature. “Oh, I’m so busy” sounds like a lament, but in truth it means, “I am really important.”

Often we stay busy because we fear the silence. We fear that we will have nothing to show for ourselves, that if we stop in silence and listen, we’ll be found wanting. Perhaps we *will be* found wanting. Is that really so bad? It’s true isn’t it? Do you think God doesn’t already know? God knows and God loves you just the same.

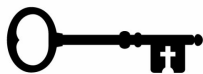
The silence of prayer is an occasion for discovering that we are not defined by what we do or by our accomplishments, and most certainly are not defined by our busyness. The silence of prayer is an occasion for discovering that we are lovable and that we are loved—for the sheer joy of it: because we are, because we were born and are alive, because God loves every single person and thing that God creates. You are God’s beloved, you are precious beyond measure. As we come to know ourselves not as the world knows us, but as God knows us, we can make different choices in our lives.

**Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, Oxford University Press, 2006, by Martin Laird is superb. Quotes here are from pp. 53–54.

Now the practice of prayer in itself will not make us right with God, but it is one of the tangible things that we can do to nourish the life of the Spirit; for through prayer we may know God loves us—for the sheer joy of it: just for being ourselves. Prayer, like gardening and sailing, writes Martin Laird, “involves skills of receptivity. The skills are necessary but by themselves insufficient. And so it is with contemplative practice and the spiritual life generally. Contemplation is sheer gift. There is nothing we can do to bring forth its flowering, but there are important skills, without which it will be unlikely to flower.” Thus might we pray.

When you fast, when you give alms, when you pray. Jesus does not say, “if you fast, if you give alms . . .” Jesus takes as a given that these things are part of our spiritual practice. If it happens to be the case that these are not practices that you customarily practice, this is a good time to try.

Fast, that you might know your hunger for God. Give alms, that you might know yourself connected to all others. Pray, that you might know God loves you--for the sheer joy of it.



Open hearts. Open minds.