

## **Fasting at the Table**

**Luke 4:1-21**

**Hyattstown Community Church (Disciples of Christ)**

**March 10, 2019**

This past week, with the observance of Ash Wednesday, we entered a period of self-reflection in anticipation of the great joy of Easter. Symbolically, this 40-day period of Lent parallels Christ's 40-day withdrawal into the wilderness following his baptism. The use of ashes at the beginning of Lent is rooted in an ancient tradition that even Jesus alluded to, and for 1000 years after his death, the wearing of sackcloth and ashes was a public sign of repentance for sin. After centuries of revision, now the practice is reduced to ashes in the form of a cross on the forehead, indicating loyalty to Jesus.

When it comes to faithfulness, inward transformation is far more essential than outward preparations. True repentance is not about the ritualistic confession of sins, though that is a start, of course. True repentance is about turning away from the darkness of unruly existence, in order to embrace the light of an entirely new life, as guaranteed by God's gift to the world in Jesus Christ.

The forty days and nights that Jesus spent in the wilderness, as recorded in Luke as well as Matthew and Mark, parallels the forty days and nights that Moses spent in the wilderness, as recorded in Deuteronomy. For Moses, the 40 days constituted a time of preparation for leading the Israelites to the Promised Land. For Jesus, the 40 days constituted a time of gaining resolve for his destiny as the Son of God—resolve confirmed by his resistance to all overtures issued by that wily Satan. Fasting was a primary component of both wilderness experiences.

But notice: "Fast" is only one letter removed from "feast"!

It was St. Ambrose, an Italian Bishop of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, who wisely observed: *"The devil tempts that he may ruin; God tests that he may crown."*

Three years ago this very week, my spirit was tested. The deaths of Kathy, the wife of a church member, and Lenora, a dear friend from a former church, both after long argument with cancer, weighed heavily on me. Simultaneously, a call from Simone, a co-worker and colleague, from the Georgetown Hospital emergency room, added to my gloom. In the midst, another call came from my daughter in Chicago, describing how she had been assaulted while visiting a friend. A little while later that same day, I learned that my granddaughter, after a three-week disappearance from home, was being admitted to a rehab facility.

The test of my faithfulness that week did not compare to the test experienced by Kathy...or Lenora...or Simone...or my daughter...or my granddaughter. But it is with no disrespect for the suffering endured by these dear women that I submit: No test confronting any one of us in this life compares to the test endured by Jesus, with its attendant suffering, on our behalf. That which was God's sacrifice is the only way that our lives have meaning at all.

*"The devil tempts that he may ruin; God tests that he may crown."*

My sister's physical body was ravaged by cancer, and less than three months after it was first diagnosed, she died two months shy of the age of 76. During the period of Elly's advancing illness, I travelled six times to be with her. The last was to accompany her on the final 48 hours of her journey on this earth. I spent two nights alone watching death kidnap a life of good cheer, good charity, good courage, and good faith. It is a privilege without parallel, that some of you have similarly experienced.

This time, my faithfulness is not tested. Elly died as she herself chose, having refused any treatment that she believed could not overcome her relentless adversary, and having refused any intervention that she believed would only prolong the inevitable. Elly's unwavering trust in God, both in life and in death, has immeasurably gifted those who loved her.

In younger days, there were family camping trips from coast to coast and border to border. In middle years, there were kids to help enjoy being cousins, and congregations to help discern God's will. In later years, there were happy reunions at restaurants scattered across the Midwest.

This time, there is some sadness that the cherished memories of a blessed existence cannot be re-visited or re-lived. But this time, my faithfulness is not tested. For Jesus, too, there must have been some sadness that the cherished memories of a blessed existence would not be re-visited or re-lived.

With obvious intention, Jesus gave us a way to celebrate the sacrifice of our Maker in order that, even in despair, even in suffering, even in an unruly world, our lives would have meaning. He sat us down to a feast. He declared that it was an open table, exclusive of no one. And he said, whenever you come together like this in my name, remember me.

When it comes to faithfulness, inward transformation is far more essential than outward preparations. True repentance is not about the ritualistic confession of sins, though that is a start, of course. True repentance is about turning away from the darkness of unruly existence, in order to embrace the light of an entirely new life, as guaranteed by God's gift to the world in Jesus Christ.

And notice: "Fast" is only one letter removed from "feast"!