

Fasting & The Resurrection of the Body

Dear Folks,

This week we have two pieces for you. The first is by Fred Niedner of the Theology Department at Valparaiso University. It's his pre-Ash Wednesday column for the Post-Tribune which is part of the Chicago Sun Times chain of newspapers.

The second is by Rick Mueller, pastor at The Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Florissant, Missouri. It's his Epiphany 2 sermon on 1Cor 6:12-20.

Enjoy,
Robin

This Wednesday Christian communities throughout the world begin observing Lent, a time named for this season's lengthening daylight hours. Lent spans the 40 days, not counting Sundays, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, and commemorates Jesus' 40 days of testing in the wilderness prior to the start of his ministry. Jesus' desert sojourn, in turn, recalls Israel's 40 years in the wilderness between slavery in Egypt and freedom in the land of promise.

Jesus fasted during his 40 days of testing. Israel survived on bread whose name testifies to its strangeness. Manna, they called it, Hebrew for "What's that?" A daily ration of the same, old stuff, month after month, year after year, put Israel to the test even as fasting brought Jesus to the brink of vulnerability. Accordingly, as part of their Lenten practice many Christians abstain from something they ordinarily take for granted.

Some who learned this tradition as children imagined it a wonderful boon to their lives. What a perfect reason to give up broccoli, spinach, and cooked carrots! As for modern manna and quail, that sounds like a sacred diet of macaroni and cheese with an occasional burger, right?

Not. Most who tried that little gambit learned quickly enough that the vegetables stayed while the good stuff, like soda pop, chocolate or the movies, went on the abstention list. Adults who took this practice seriously gave up something precious—a favorite food item, alcohol perhaps, or most anything they might consider an indulgence.

The whole idea was to put oneself to the test so as to see if something in one's life had become a lord and master, a god even, instead of a benign servant over which we have control. Have idols crept into our hearts and souls without our noticing and begun to rule us?

This ancient practice is worth trying, especially if taken seriously. But one can exercise alternative disciplines in Lent that serve a similar purpose. One stems from another perspective on Israel's wilderness journey. The Bible says that in those 40 years God tested Israel, but Israel also tested God. God was put to the test? Indeed. God bore with the people through all those years, and the more they murmured the harder it got. Moreover, all the while God knew he didn't have to carry on or bear with this crowd. They were a burden God chose.

Therein lies an alternative Lenten practice. Rather than give up something, choose to take on something new. For 40 days, devote yourself to someone who doesn't, and perhaps couldn't, deserve your devotion.

Pray for someone who wouldn't think of praying for you, and maybe doesn't think to raise a care for anyone else.

To your already busy days, add one more regular stop that enables some small act of kindness that's completely new to your routine.

"That's nuts!" you say. And you're right. But you'll likely be amazed at what gets displaced in your life to make room for carrying this one new thing for 40 days. If you still want whatever it was when the 40 days is up, it won't be too hard to circle back and retrieve it. More likely, you won't need it any more.

One last thing-the same rule that applies to fasting or giving something up for Lent holds also for picking up a new burden. Don't let anyone else know what you're up to. Keep it a secret between you and God. It's part of a discipline whose beauty is to keep one from making an idol of others' approval and admiration.

But even better, it invites us to imagine with complete abandon just how much goodness is going on around us secretly, waiting to burst forth at any moment, just like the great surprise of the season's grand finale.

Frederick Niedner, Jr.

Have you ever noticed that for a preacher, I don't use the word "soul" very often, that I don't talk about "saving souls" or about how many "souls" we have here at Atonement, and that I rarely pick hymns that include the word "soul" or, if I do, that we skip over the stanza that includes "soul"? When our cancer support group was formed – an excellent program, by the way – I balked at the promotional line, "Saving Lives, as Well as Souls." Those of you who know me know that I try to choose words with some degree of precision, and so you might wonder why I

regard this hallowed word of Christendom with such disdain. After all, isn't "saving souls" what the Church is all about – or have I become one of those "modernists" who doesn't think that this is important any more?

Well, the answer to all these questions is found right in our Lesson from First Corinthians. But, to understand this lesson, you need to understand the world which Paul is addressing. There were two basic and competing "schools of thought" in Corinth and elsewhere in ancient Greece, the Epicureans and the Stoics. They operated from the same philosophical premise, but they took it to diametrically opposite conclusions. The premise was that "bodies don't count," that "your body doesn't matter." What matters, the ancient Greeks agreed, was your "soul," that indefinable, invisible, little "inner butterfly" that supposedly makes you who you are. And, so, the Greeks argued, what happens to and with your body is of no consequence. "Bodies don't count." So, the Epicureans took the argument one way and said that, if what you do with your body makes no difference and all that matters is your "soul," then, "live it up – wine, women, and song, and whatever else feels good or strikes your fancy," because "bodies don't count." The Stoics took the argument in the other direction. If "bodies don't count" and what really matters is your "soul," then subject your body at every turn; deny yourself every bodily sensation; hold your body in submission, in order to purify your "soul."

Those were the two competing worldviews held by those in Corinth to whom Paul is writing, and, as we discover by reading elsewhere in First Corinthians, were very much in tension and causing some very sharp divisions, even within this Church. And, much of Paul's letter is written specifically to address those divisions, but Paul does so, not by taking sides, but by pointing out the radically different nature of the Christian faith, which believes and teaches that, because we are created

in the image of God, God regards our bodies as “of the essence.”

Which is why, for St. Paul, it is so important to proclaim that Jesus was put to death in the body – in other words, that He really died – and that He was raised from the dead, bodily! This is not just some “out-of-body” or “spiritual” experience Jesus had. He was really dead, and He really rose from the dead. Bodily!

In the same way, the Creeds of the Church, drawing heavily on Paul and rejecting contemporary Greek philosophy, refuse to speak of “the immortality of the soul” and instead declare that the Christian’s hope is “the resurrection of the body.” That’s what we celebrate every Easter; that’s what we proclaim at every funeral: “the resurrection of the body”!

Frankly, I could digress at some length on this glorious promise from the Creeds. I could digress at some length on the scandal created by Paul’s teaching. I could digress at some length on how these Greek ideas “wormed” their way into the Christian faith over the years to the point that they became almost indistinguishable from it. [Just look at the ways in which so much of our hymnody, theology, and devotional literature uses the word “soul” in the Greek sense – that “invisible little butterfly” – rather than in the biblical sense – the totality of our being.] But, our text points us in another direction.

Consider these few phrases: “The body was not meant for fornication, but for the Lord [for] God raised the Lord and will also raise us by His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Or, do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you? You were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body!” What we do with our bodies does “matter”! So, how do we “glorify God” with our bodies? For starters, we can ask ourselves why Christians can be

among the most glum-looking people on earth, often wearing our faith like “a chip on our shoulder.” We can look so glum! Just stand in the narthex some Sunday morning and look at the faces of folks coming to worship – and then compare them to the faces of folks going to the Rams’ playoff game later today.

We’ve been given the gift of eternal life; our sins are all forgiven; God’s love goes with us every step of the way. Maybe we could “glorify God in [our] bodies” by standing up straight, holding our heads high, putting a smile on our face, and even [this’ll be tough] singing a hymn that isn’t our favorite. “Glorify God [with] your body!”

And, because our “bodies do count,” we can also “glorify God” by taking care of them. Our “weigh-down” group has been working on that – and has reported some pretty interesting results. What we do with our bodies “matters,” in terms of diet and exercise and hygiene and medical care and overcoming our worst habits and compulsions. And, because God cares about our bodies enough so that His Son died in His body, so that “God could raise our bodies to be like His is glory;” we can be certain that God will be with us to strengthen and support us, as we strive to “glorify God” in these ways also “in our body”!

And, we certainly cannot do justice to this particular text, if we overlook the necessity to “glorify God in our bodies” in how we use God’s good gift of our sexuality – to use it to strengthen and sustain marriage, the family, and the basic structures of society. Reject all those excuses and arguments that have their roots in Greek philosophy or in pure self-centeredness – and, they’re out there aplenty. What you do with your body does matter. Use it to express your love for the one to whom you are united by God in marriage – “glorify God in your body.” And, God will strengthen you there, also!

No, this is one preacher who has no interest in saving “invisible little butterflies” and every interest in proclaiming with St. Paul that “yes, it’s your body, ” but it is also “a member of Christ,” a “temple of the Holy Spirit,” it was “bought with a price;” it will be raised on the last day, so “glorify God in your body.”

Amen.

Rick Mueller