



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, March 1, 2009
The First Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Mark 2:18-22

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A FAST APPROACH TO GOD

Last week, as it happens, I spoke about the importance of honesty in prayer. We should always be straightforward with God about what we want, because, in the resulting “conversation” with God that is prayer, we may discover God answering our deepest want of all, which is our longing not to be alone. God knows we don’t want to be alone, and when we “follow” him in prayer, we find that we aren’t.

This evening I’d like to take that thought a little further, and consider two ways of approaching God. The first way is one that embraces images. It engages the senses. This sort of prayer might focus on an icon or holy painting, might have incense burning, might have quiet music in the background. It is a prayer that surrounds the person praying with sensory delight so that she turns to the source of that delight, the God who loves her in and through all things. In its meditative mode, prayer of this sort engages the imagination fully, as Ignatius of Loyola famously taught. A typical prayer session would be to take a passage of scripture, say a story involving Jesus, and read the passage a few times slowly with intense focus on the details. Then you allow the scene to unfold in your mind. You ask what is happening. What are the smells in this scene? What kind of light is there? As the scene continues to unfold, you ask, Who am I in this scene? Am I Peter? Or the ill man on a pallet? A bystander? Am I perhaps (it is not impious to ask) Jesus, trying to be true and finding myself misunderstood? Or am I the small-hearted Pharisee, feeling envy that someone else is receiving love and attention?

To approach God, that is one way. And the other is the opposite. It is the prayer that turns away from the senses, closes its eyes, tries to smell and see and feel nothing. Through sensory deprivation, this prayer intends the God who is mystery, the creator who is no creature, the God who gives being to the person praying every second of the day, the God who is closer than our next heartbeat, but never seen, never touched, never present to the senses. The great guides in this kind

of prayer (one thinks, for instance, of the Russian spiritual classic *The Way of a Pilgrim*) often teach the repetition of a very short sentence or even a single word, itself tied to the rhythm of breathing. The focus on the word provides a gentle means to ignore images and distractions, which of course continually come; one keeps turning back, gently, persistently, to the still, unmoving, unknowable point at the center. A very simple form of this prayer is simply to say the name “Jesus” slowly: “Je-” as you inhale, “-sus” as you exhale.

So there are these two classic and quite different ways of approaching God in prayer. But why do we want to approach God at all? Perhaps the answer is obvious. We want to approach God because we feel distant from him. But why is there distance between us and God? There is distance because that is our condition, that is the kind of world we have made. The traditional word for making distance between ourselves and God is sin. Sinning is when we say we’d rather be alone than be with God and with others. Sin is the choice of isolation over communion.

So if I am right in what I said last week, that our deepest fear is that we will be left alone, then our fear is grounded in an apprehension of the reality of sin. I don’t want the isolation that my human sinfulness has created for me. That’s why I long to approach God: I really don’t want to be alone.

But which is the right way to approach him? Shall we use the prayer that affirms the senses, or the prayer that turns away from sensory input? This difference occurred to me as I was studying this evening’s gospel, in which we have the difference between feasting and fasting. On the one hand: the disciples of Jesus, who enjoy to the full the presence of their master, and every day enjoy the good things God created for the table. On the other hand: the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees, both of whom had regular days of fasting. Which is the better way? That is, which way should we pray? But what a nasty question it is, when we encounter it in the gospel. It comes from a wicked, tiny human heart: Why are your folks feasting, Jesus? Don’t they know everyone’s supposed to fast?

Jesus answers the question by pointing out that, in the long run, no one in this picture is going to avoid fasting. But at this time Jesus’ disciples aren’t fasting for a reason the small-hearted won’t understand. And the reason is this: Jesus brings God’s love into the midst of creation. When God is there in front of you, present in the flesh, you cannot, you dare not, turn away from your senses. Of course they eat together. It is heaven itself to have Jesus with them.

But later they will fast. There is a time for feasting, and a time to turn away from the feast. The church calls the disciples of Jesus to days and seasons of fasting. Sometimes we feast: Easter, Pentecost, Christmas, the great festivals. And sometimes we put feasting aside. All Jews in Jesus’ time were expected to fast one day a year, on the Day of Atonement; the Pharisees, in addition, fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Similarly, our church calls us to two days of fasting each year—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In addition, most Fridays, along with the weekdays of Lent, are days of special devotion, and one option (not required) for keeping them is to make a fast.

May I say a few practical things about fasting? Fasting is to be adapted to the person: no one should ever fast in a way that is physically harmful. A person whose health is compromised, or someone on a strictly prescribed diet, or indeed a growing child or an elderly person—if such a person does any fasting at all it should be small and symbolic.

The complementary point is that fasting can be combined with health goals. Thus might a person deny himself sweets.

Sometimes an almost minuscule fast can be significant. I know a man who once gave up for Lent adding milk to his coffee. Such a tiny thing—but for him, it proved impossible. He owned that through his little fast he learned how utterly and completely he depended upon God—even for the tiniest things.

For someone who is able, it seems good to me to turn away from the crops and the fruits of the earth from time to time, enough to feel seriously hungry. After all, most humans, most of the time, have been hungry, and our occasional fast can be a way of softening our hearts to them. Fasting won't do if it makes you grumpy. But if it softens your heart and helps you feel love and solidarity with others—then look! Fasting is overcoming the isolation of sin.

There are different ways to approach God, not just one right way. At present we are in the season marked, among other things, by fasting. If you want God, if you don't want to be alone, you might try the way that puts off images, for the sake of a focus on the still small point, the mystery who is always with us, just out of sight, never touched, but always there for us—despite the fact that we go through most our days oblivious to him.