

# First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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## PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

### WHAT'S ON THE MENU FOR LENT?

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. We might encounter someone during the day with a dark smudge on their forehead. Maybe we'll have one on our forehead. Inevitably, Ash Wednesday brings with it the question of fasting. "What shall I give up for Lent?" Historically Lenten fasting has been about food, especially abstaining from meat. So our minds go chocolate, coffee, popcorn, or alcohol. No one says, "I'm giving up broccoli for Lent."

Recommendations for how and when to fast are as modern as today's websites and social media. Alternative medicine has numerous suggestions for how to fast in order to improve one's health. Library and bookstore shelves are lined with books recommending how fasting promises to help us reduce our weight, better control pre-diabetes, lower our blood pressure, and offer us a smorgasbord of other benefits.

People across history have also used fasting from food as a political statement. Mahatma Gandhi fasted to protest British colonialism in India. In 1981 ten Irish nationalists who were fasting to demand their recognition as political prisoners died in a Belfast prison.

The Protestant Reformation began, in part, as a protest against Lenten fasting. In 1522 Ulrich Zwingli published a small tract in Zurich, Switzerland, entitled "On the Choice and Freedom of Foods." In it, he defended a local employer who had provided his workers with sausages during Lent to keep up their spirits while they hurried to complete a project. Zwingli argued that the Bible does not prescribe fasting and God does not care whether people eat meat or plants. Drawing on the writings of Paul, Zwingli and other early leaders of the Reformation claimed that we do not find salvation through "works" like fasting and other forms of self-denial but only through the grace of God.

I'm not so sure about Zwingli's contention that the Good Book has nothing to say about fasting. Hebrew scriptures have numerous references to fasting from food. Moses fasts 40 days on Mt. Sinai not just once but twice (Ex 34:28 and Deut. 9:9). Elijah travels 40 days and nights in the wilderness without food (1 Kings 19:7-8). In the New Testament, Jesus fasts 40 days and 40 nights in the desert following his baptism.

In the earliest church, fasting was common but was not defined in terms of 40 days prior to Easter. It was a day here; a week, there. It's not until 325 CE that the Council of Nicea (the same council that gives us the creed in our hymnal that we very occasionally recite) recommends a forty-day pre-Easter fast. But it doesn't call this fast "Lent." It simply uses the Greek word "forty." In most European languages that is still its name. In Italian it's *Quarestima* (from *quaranta*/forty). In French, it's *Carême* (from *quarante*/forty).

Our English word "Lent" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning "to lengthen." Lent comes in that season when the daytime hours lengthen as spring approaches. Calling the pre-Easter season "Lent" reminds us that Lent's purpose is to invite the practice of spiritual disciplines that "lengthen" or grow us as persons in Christ.

Collections of the sayings of the desert monks and nuns come from Christianity's earliest centuries when fasting was a more general spiritual practice. In one of these sayings the central figure is Abba or Father Poeman who was considered a particularly wise spiritual director. In it, *Abba Joseph comes to Abba Poeman and asks him, "How should one fast?" Abba Poeman said, "For my part I think it is better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied." Abba Joseph said to him, "When you were younger, did you not fast?" The old man said, "Yes. Even for three days or four or the whole week. The Fathers and Mothers tried all this out ... and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is not burdensome."*

The royal way of Abba Poeman refers to bringing balance back to our sometimes off-kilter lives not by strenuous effort but by gentle persistence. When we fast, we eat but not to the point that we make obsessing over food into the most

important thing in our lives. Food is necessary and good; but only when it does not take on an importance greater than God's presence in our hearts.

This idea applies to so much more than food. What in our lives are we letting occupy a bigger emotional and spiritual space than it rightly deserves? There's a delicate balance between serving others and caring for ourselves. The same is true of the balance between work and home or the need for safety and the necessity of taking risks in order to grow. Or the balance between stability and variety. Or between certainty and an openness to learning new things. When these different polarities fall out of balance, our lives suffer both spiritually and practically.

What Lent puts on our menu list is the question of how well we are balancing the priorities, desires, and emotions that our Creator has implanted within us that together make for wholeness, liveliness, and well-being. As Lent begins, we might ask ourselves what kind of fast we need in in order to seek the balance and wholeness God longs for us to have.

- Where does my life feel out of balance?
- What are simple, doable steps and spiritual disciplines that can move me toward greater balance between competing demands and claims upon my time, energy, and attention?

Am I feeling a loneliness that challenges me to risk reaching out to befriend others? Have I let the contagion of despair overwhelm me so that I need to look more intentionally for even the tenderest green shoots of hope? If fear grips me, what are small ways I can embrace the courage to act and speak? What parts of my life are off-center and what "royal way" of Lenten spiritual discipline may help me to re-balance myself so life is more centered on the holiness and wholeness that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Blessings on our Lenten journey, Thomas

### ALTAR FLOWERS

The flower committee invites you to remember, and honor loved ones or offer celebration for a joyous event. We have following open dates!

- March 1, 15 ,22 & 29
- April 5, 12, 19 & 26

Call the church office if you are interested or sign up in the breezeway.

### PRAYER

As Lent begins, I am sharing a prayer often attributed to Pope Francis that is appropriate for the whole season of Lent: As we begin the season of lent help us, O Lord, to embrace the opportunity to:

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.  
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.  
Fast from anger and be filled with patience.  
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.  
Fast from worries and have trust in God.  
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.  
Fast from pressures and be prayerful.  
Fast from bitterness and fill our hearts with joy.  
Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.  
Fast from grudges and be reconciled.  
Fast from words and be silent so we can listen.

We pray that our only desire and our one choice  
is to choose what better leads to the deepening of God's life in us. Amen.



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