

Making Room

Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18; Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-28

Faith Link: We can focus our minds on God.¹

One year my high school youth group decided to fast during our annual retreat at Camp Menno Haven. Neither my brother nor I can recall how long the fast lasted, but I think we ate a meal on our way to the camp on Friday evening, drank only water while we were there and then broke the fast on our way home Sunday afternoon. This was the youth's idea – at least some of us – and not the sponsors'. Given that the only thing my brother and I remember about the retreat is that we fasted and some in the group – most of the boys – complained about it the whole time, I'm not sure the practice of abstaining from food helped us to focus our minds on God – on studying the Bible and praying together.

Giving to the poor, praying, and fasting were the three traditional practices of righteousness in ancient Jewish life. Jesus mentioned these practices in the Sermon on the Mount.² New Testament writers continued to cite these expressions of piety as evidence of devotion to God.

In the traditional sense, fasting is the deliberate, temporary abstention from food for religious reasons. Purposes given for fasting in biblical stories include repentance, distress, mourning, or preparation for encountering God. Fasting might be accompanied by weeping, tearing one's clothing, donning sackcloth, or applying ashes to one's head.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shared a sample prayer with his disciples and taught them about giving alms and fasting. But Jesus didn't just give his disciples how-to instructions for praying and fasting. The heart of his teaching was about their motivation for these actions.

The people Jesus referred to in Matthew 6 would make it obvious that they were fasting. They wouldn't practice their usual habits of daily hygiene. Jesus instructed the subjects of his criticism to act normal and not call attention to themselves. He emphasized the importance of a person's motives when performing the traditional acts of religious devotion.

The spiritual practices we're exploring this summer are to be used for connecting to God, opening oneself to the Spirit, and serving others. We practice them to seek God together; to strengthen our relationships with God and with each other and to have inner peace. They are not to be used for self-glorification.

For the early church, prayer and fasting were essential to the community's discernment process. In Acts, the people of the Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas out to preach after they had fasted and prayed. Paul and Barnabas continued these practices during their missionary journeys, fasting and praying as they commissioned leaders for the churches and discerned next steps for their ministry. In order to seek God, they had to make room for God. Paul and Barnabas would seek God's direction in every place they would go, especially as they set up leaders in each church group.

Fasting is a remedy for fullness. Consider the ways in which we, as a culture, are full. And not only full, but constantly on a quest for more. What we have is never quite enough.

Consider the ways in which your life is full. And not only full, but on the brink of being unmanageable, let alone being fulfilling and enjoyable. We have demands on our attention from family, friends, bosses, teachers, classmates, church members, neighbors, and even complete strangers.

¹ The sermon is drawn from Week 3 of "Seeking God Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#); Week 6 Worship Resources written by Alissa Bender, *Leader, Summer 2018*, Vol. 15, No. 4, ©2018 MennoMedia, p. 47; and Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*, Jossey-Bass, p. 108.

² Matthew 6:1-18.

Fasting is a remedy for distraction. We live at a time when we have constant distractions. We carry devices with us that allow us to check our calendars, play games, watch videos, discover places to go, learn another language, listen to podcasts, find restaurants, take pictures, send texts, and once in a great while actually talk to someone.

This past week I spent four days with family at Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp in Colorado. After carrying our suitcases into our cabin, one of the first things most of us did – me included – was check to see if we had phone service and Wi-Fi. We did a fairly good job of putting the phones away while we ate, played games, and talked, but they were never far away.

It can be hard to make room for God when life is busy or full of distractions, demands, and worries. Biblical fasting, whether about repentance or preparation, was always about cleaning out and making room for God. The practice of fasting – from food, yes, but more importantly, from some activities, says “No more.” The practice of fasting interrupts us when what we consume begins to consume us, and what we possess is in danger of possessing us.

Early in the coronavirus pandemic, decluttering became a popular pastime for many people who found themselves at home more than usual. Cleaning out closets, bookshelves, and cabinets provided a sense of order and space during a time of uncertainty and isolation—not to mention a lot less to clean around. Decluttering our physical spaces can provide room for the things that really matter, like space to read, pray, take up a new hobby, or gather with family and friends.

To make room for God in our lives, we often need to declutter—both our physical stuff and spiritual stuff. Fasting can be thought of as a way of decluttering or making room for God in our lives. Fasting can mean abstaining from food or other physical or mental distraction, but the purpose remains the same – making room.

Refraining from eating doesn’t make a person spiritual. It’s what we allow those pangs of emptiness and longing to do in us that nurtures our spiritual life. Refraining from certain activities – the questionable ones, of course, and even some good ones – doesn’t make us holy. It’s about cleaning out spaces and making room for God. It’s about restoring and strengthening our relationships with God, with other people, and with our inner selves.

What is your experience with fasting – either refraining from eating or from an activity?

What questions do you have about fasting or about the scriptures we heard today?

What would it look like to make room in your life to focus on God? What do you need to take a break from temporarily or let go of permanently to make room for God?

God is with us in this very moment. God is teaching us to give, to share, and to receive what we need. In order to hear and live out this teaching, we need to open ourselves to God. We need to make room so we can focus on God and allow God’s kingdom to come.

May it be so.

One way of making room for God is to use a centering prayer to welcome God into your life. This is not a familiar or comfortable way to pray for many of us, but I encourage you to give it a try.

Centering Prayer

Think about a place in your house, church, or neighborhood where you feel close to God.

Sit comfortably, with a straight back, and close your eyes.

Settle your body and mind and imagine walking into your special place.

As you settle in, imagine yourself removing anything from the space that is a distraction.

Welcome God into your special place and listen for what God has to say to you.

When you become aware of thoughts that draw you away, return gently to your special place.

As your prayer time comes to an end, remain in silence with your eyes closed for a few minutes.