

Christina Litwiller
Salina Mennonite Church
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Scripture: John 6:22-40; Isaiah 58:1-9

Making Room

Within an eight hour period on Thursday, I participated in four meetings via Zoom. First was a lunch meeting with a few folks from Western District Conference. The topic was how to test multiple interpretations and points of view when making decisions about resuming worship in-person. This is quite relevant to the decision we're making for our congregation right now.

Next came my weekly conversation with four college friends. It's always a joy to see their faces and hear what's happening in their lives and community.

Then I joined a webinar presented by Mennonite Church USA titled *Racism, Church, and Change*. Panelists responded to four questions: (1) How is racism manifested in the church? (2) What is the impact of culture on worship, leadership, and church structure? (3) What works and what doesn't work in dismantling racism in the church? (4) How can MCUSA congregations practice racial reparation? This, of course, is another crucial conversation.

My fourth and final Zoom gathering on Thursday was Sharing and Prayer time with a few members of Salina Mennonite Church. I suppose I could view this as an obligation, part of my job, but it's also a benefit, feeding my spiritual and social life.

If I expand the window for counting Zoom meetings to 25 hours, I could add one more. On Wednesday evening, I talked with my three brothers for an hour and a half. I communicate with them via text, phone, and email on a somewhat regular basis, but this is the first time we've ever met up via Zoom. I was with one brother about five months ago in Egypt and the other two in Illinois more than six months ago, so it's been awhile since I've been with any relatives. For the first few minutes of our time together, I was overwhelmed with the joy of seeing their faces.

Now that I think about it, I met with my Pastor Peer Group on Wednesday morning. We meet monthly to talk about our congregational and personal lives. Usually, I travel to Topeka, but since March we've been meeting on Zoom.

That makes six Zoom meetings in 35 hours. The three church-related meetings contributed to a total of ten hours I spent working in the church building on Thursday. This is highly unusual. At the end of the day, I decided it was much too much! There were good reasons to participate in all six of the meetings. And the extra hours of church work on Thursday helped to lessen some stress I've been experiencing about our Thursday evening and Sunday morning gatherings. I don't know what I should have left out. But I'm certain stretches like this aren't sustainable.

I identify with the magpie in our story today.¹ Recall the progression of gathering items for the nest. *Nothing. Something. A few, several, more and more and more. Lots. Plenty. A bit much. Much too much. Way too much. Enough? Enough! More than enough. EVERYTHING! Oh, no!*

¹ I. C. Springman, *More*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012

We've all experienced the trouble of "some" becoming "too much." And I realize that for a number, maybe many of you, "too much" is the usual status of your life. Because this is so often the case, it's appropriate for us to consider the spiritual practice of fasting.²

Giving to the poor, praying, and fasting were the three traditional practices of righteousness in ancient Jewish life. New Testament writers continued to cite these expressions of piety as evidence of devotion to God. Jesus mentioned these practices in the Sermon on the Mount.³

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, lament, tearing one's clothing, donning sackcloth, applying ashes to one's head, or falling to the ground. The only annual national fast day prescribed by Old Testament law was the Day of Atonement.⁴ The people Jesus referred to in the Sermon on the Mount would make it obvious that they were fasting. They wouldn't practice their usual habits of daily hygiene. Jesus instructed them to act normal and not call attention to themselves.

My religious instruction included a lot about tithing money and praying, but nothing about fasting. I do recall one high school retreat when we decided not to eat during the 24 hours or so we were at the camp. We concentrated on studying the Bible and praying together. This turned out a lot better for the girls than it did for the boys.

Other religious traditions continue to practice fasting in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons. And many people have begun the practice of intermittent fasting as a way to improve their health. But since I don't recall reading anything about fasting in the Mennonite Confession of Faith.⁵ And since I'm not qualified to either recommend or discredit intermittent fasting, it would be reasonable to question why I'm talking about it in a sermon.

Again, I go back to the story of the magpie and the nest so full of treasures that the branch breaks, spilling everything onto the ground. 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, more, more. Consider the ways in which your life is full. And not only full, but constantly on the brink of being unmanageable, let alone being fulfilling and enjoyable.

The practice of fasting says "No more." The practice of fasting interrupts us when what we consume begins to consume us, and when what we possess is in danger of possessing us. Biblical fasting, whether about repentance or preparation, was always about cleaning out and making room for God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized the importance of a person's motives when performing the traditional acts of religious devotion. Giving to the poor, praying, and fasting are for the glorification of God, opening oneself to the Spirit, and serving others. They are to be practiced to restore relationships with God and others and to have inner peace. They are not to be used for self-glorification. Jesus condemned those who practice devotion in order to be seen and honored.⁶ He castigated those who teach the law but don't follow it; who follow

² The section on fasting draws from 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.

³ Matthew 6:1-18.

⁴ Leviticus 23:27

⁵ <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/>

⁶ Mark 12:38-40; Luke 20:34-37

the tiniest letter of the law while ignoring the weightier spirit of the law requiring justice, mercy, and faith.⁷

The Old Testament prophets also drew the connection between worship and intention or between worship and the authentic, moral living that Jesus talked about.⁸ The entire 58th chapter of Isaiah serves as background for Matthew 6. The prophet Isaiah spoke God's words to a community that went through the motions of the practice of fasting.

*This is the fast that God chooses: to undo the chains of injustice, to break down systems of oppression, to give away our bread to the hungry, to make room for the homeless, to let go of the divisions between us and our neighbors. God will guide us continually and satisfy our needs in parched places. We will be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.*⁹

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.

In John 6, Jesus asked his followers: "Will you let me feed you? Will you trust me to give you what you really need?"¹⁰ We too need to experience limits that are life restoring, like the limits that allow a field to lie fallow before growing again. We too need to make space for the Spirit to breathe a fresh breath of air. We need to practice our own version of the magpie discovering the joy of "less" becoming "enough." *Less and less. A lot less. Not so much. Not much at all. Enough? Yes, enough.* Similar to the magpie, the idea of fasting for us is to make room for what is most important.

During the past four months, the entire world has experienced a form of forced fasting. Suddenly, many of our usual activities disappeared from our lives. Our schedules opened up. We discovered how delightful our parents, children, and housemates are. We used technology to reconnect with relatives and friends scattered around the country and world. We learned to cook again. We read books, caught up on movies, completed home projects, cleaned closets, and put puzzles together. We sat on our porches and walked through our neighborhoods. We took time to think.

Of course, this forced fasting also brought catastrophic consequences. I don't want to minimize the physical, economic, mental, and social toll it's taken on many lives. This pandemic has caused stress, disappointment, loneliness, and grief. It has unmasked problems that are often hidden but can no longer be ignored. The most vulnerable around us have suffered the most. Many of us who are less vulnerable have been forced to see the inequities built into our societal structures. We must heed the words of Jesus and the prophets commanding us to seek justice, act with kindness, and walk humbly with God.

And we must help each other consider how we can make room in our lives for what is most important – for relationships, livelihood, justice, kindness, and peace with God. As much as it is possible, we can carefully consider what activities and obligations to add back into our schedules as life continues and eventually returns to our new normal, whenever it may be and whatever it may look like. We can acknowledge that too many good things all at once is not beneficial.

⁷ Matthew 23:1-28

⁸ Amos 5:21-24; Jeremiah 14:10-12; Zechariah 7:4-10; Isaiah 29:13-14; Isaiah 58:1-14

⁹ Adapted from Isaiah 58:6-7, 11

¹⁰ John 6:22-40

If we truly believe that we are to love our neighbor and that everyone is our neighbor, we can refrain –we can fast – from turning every conversation into a debate. We can concentrate on naming the issues and situations that concern us without speaking hatefully about the people involved or denigrating our friend or neighbor whose views are different than our own.

When information overload has negative effects on our inner peace and relationships, we can take a break from social media and news reports. Instead, we can reduce the chatter in our minds and let God’s spirit fill our hearts.

As I developed this list, my thought progression went something like this: “Yes, I definitely need to do the first one. Oh, yes, I need to do that one to. Oh dear, the last one hits home as well.”

When it comes to making room in our lives along with seeking justice and right relationships, we need both accountability and grace. We hold ourselves and each other accountable to do what is best for ourselves, each other, and our world. We offer grace to ourselves and each other when, inevitably, we don’t live up to our best intentions.

These are a few suggestions. I welcome your ideas of how to make room for what is most important.

Our God is a God of abundance. Not an abundance of possessions and activities, but an abundance of justice, mercy, love, and peace. 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 for God’s kingdom to come.

May it be so.