

Sermon 02-8/9-2020
 “The 2020 State-of-Your-Health Address” – Rev. Markus Wegenast
 Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶ “*And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.* ¹⁷ *But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,* ¹⁸ *so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

1)

Stacy* loves to run. She gets up early in the morning to get a good run in before work. She plays in a women’s soccer league, so doing her daily runs comes in handy for that, but there is also something uniquely spiritual about it. She feels running connects her with God, it’s almost a form of devotion for her.

The shock came in the late-80s. Stacy got diagnosed with MS and that changed everything for her. There was much outpouring of love and support from her friends at church and from the women of her soccer team.

But the disease did what it does: it progressed and Stacy knew it was probably only going to be a matter of time until she wouldn’t be able to run anymore.

10 years into treatments, long after she had to quit running and soccer, Stacy had to accept the fact that a wheelchair would become a daily companion. The doctors worked hard to manage her disease, but of course, they couldn’t stop it. And so Stacy’s health kept deteriorating.

I will come back to Stacy later – in the meantime, let’s talk about health in general.

Our personal health is one of the most precious goods that we have. We treat it that way: Try counting the number of Fox Cities clinics, therapy places, counseling centers, doctors, nurses, health coaches, alternative healing practices, fitness studios, yoga studios...

Some people say that we as a society have gone overboard a little with our emphasis on health. Sometimes it seems that we idolize our health, make health an end to itself almost like a god. Hospitals and fitness centers are our new temples, temples that everyone flecks to no matter what religion we have because health itself has become the new religion!

I want to talk about health today for a different reason. It goes along with our series on “how does God want me to live?” Our health is important to God too. Think about it:

When God came into this world in Jesus, what did he do? Did he make people sick? No, he healed people. In fact, he healed everyone who came to him with an ailment – no strings attached. God introduced himself to us by restoring our health. God does not want us to be sick - neither people like Stacy, nor you.

2)

John Wesley and the early Methodists along with many other Christian groups have recognized the importance of health and healthy living long before it became a cultural fancy.

- *Point out Means of Grace diagram in bulletin and allocate “health” on it. Point out that it is primarily personal piety but can also have a mercy component...*

Putting the idea and ideal of healthy living into this context shows us that health is not an end in itself, it's not just for personal gratification – it is connected to the needs of our neighbor, the needs of our society. You can even say that a healthy soul will be more inclined to see and respond to the needs of our neighbors.

Nowhere does that become more evident than in connecting healthy living with fasting which is something John Wesley did passionately. Are you getting uncomfortable now because I used the F-word?

Fasting is one of the themes that many Christians get very uncomfortable about (unless you're Orthodox!).

Whether you get uncomfortable when you hear the word fasting or not, whether you personally do fast or not – here is what we need to learn about fasting in connection with healthy living:

Fasting from a biblical perspective is not an end in itself, in the same way as healthy living isn't. Remember the scripture passage from last weekend?

People fasted and were wondering why God was not blessing them for it? Through the prophet Isaiah, God told them that he won't bless them because their fast was hypocritical: they fasted for themselves, while ignoring the starving people around them that wished they could afford to fast!

Jesus was fully in line with what the prophet Isaiah said hundreds of years before him (surprised?). Jesus also pointed out that fasting is hypocritical when it's done to make a big show of it.

Fasting for fasting's sake or to show off is in vain. But if you fast in order to sharpen your mind and your heart to get more in tune with God, get healthier so you can do more, and help others – well, that's a fasting that God wants for you?

- Share my own story of fasting:
 - I've struggled with having the right motivation, sometimes it was just for the purpose of shedding pounds.
 - I have just recently found a new way of fasting by eating less meat. I try to eat fish once a week, and to have one to two days of a fully vegetarian diet. It's super hard for me to do it but I do it for two reasons: personal health as an act of piety/devotion to honor the body God has given me. And I do it out of respect/mercy for God's creation > being able to spend more money on meat and animal products that come from more responsible places.

I'm not saying this to show off my newfound practice (that would be hypocritical according to Jesus) – I'm telling you about it to consider if that's something you could do too as a benefit to your health.

3)

There is one more way I'd like to look at fasting and healthy living with you and that's the biblical understanding of health that includes a person's mental health.

**A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh,
but passion makes the bones rot. - Proverbs 14:30
A cheerful heart is a good medicine,
but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. - Proverbs 17:22**

Expressions like these show us the connection of mental health and spiritual health. I have learned from parishioners that fasting can help your mental health.

Betty* was a member of a church I served a while ago. She regularly did some very severe 40 day fasting cleanses. The initial motivation was to do it for physical health, but she said that over time she found that fasting had an even greater effect on her mental and spiritual health. I will never forget when she said: "It is amazing to feel the spiritual and mental clarity you gain when you're hungry."

I've been thinking a lot about mental health recently from a perspective of finding inner peace. Peace is so hard to find these days – esp. when you watch the news.

The other day I talked to a person who is not a fan of our current president and she said that the impeachment trial of President Trump really challenged her. Many people actually have talked to me about how the state of politics, especially Washington politics, is robbing them of their peace. Last Tuesday's state of the union address was a powerful and sad prime time example for the divisiveness that we find in secular politics these days.

"All I want is for them is to get along and solve the issues our nation and world is facing." That's a statement I hear so often from people on all sides of the political spectrum.

The political climate in this time is so divisive that it doesn't surprise me when I hear people say: "I'm sick of it." I'm afraid people mean that quite literally!

If politics make you sick how can you live healthy? I think there's a way:

If politicians or some reporters make you sick – pray for them. Pray for them by name, make them persons not just impersonal representatives of institutions that you can easily demonize.

I mean that seriously. We often hear the slogan these days that someone needs prayer – but we don't actually do it. If you sincerely pray for a person you cannot stand, I think it will give healing to your being sick of them. And as a Christian I believe that when I pray for a person that that person benefits from it.

If you disapprove of a President Trump and wish so much he would have been impeached – start praying for him by name, do it often and let God take your sickening anger away so it doesn't keep you from doing something good.

If a Nancy Pelosi that tears up a president's state of the union address makes you sick, start praying for her and let God heal your anger so your anger doesn't keep you from doing something good.

Both the Apostles Peter and Paul gave instructions to the early Christians to pray for the emperor and other people in power. [Jesus too had a word to say about praying for those he was against] If you consider that the emperor at that time was Nero who was a maniac that persecuted Christians – then it should be quite possible that you can pray for a Donald Trump, a Nancy Pelosi and all others that make you sick. Pray for them by name and don't quit when you get discouraged!

Pray for them sincerely so that you do not get sick of them. It's hard to do good when you're angry and sick of someone.

4)

When it comes to healthy living there are things that we are not in control of. Remember Stacy that I told you about in the beginning. When she got sick and eventually had to stop her beloved running, there was nothing she could have done about it. No fasting, no healthy living would have prevented her from getting MS.

The way MS affected her life is terrible – there is nothing good about it. The thing that's good is her God in whom she steadfastly believes. Stacy has given herself into the hands of her God. For her a word from the Bible has taken on new meaning:

...Train yourself in godliness,⁸ for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

1 Timothy 4:7-8

Stacy **does** take care of her failing body – it's not very satisfying! She also takes care of her soul which makes her a godly person. Even diseased as she is, she reaches out to her neighbors and does good. She has taken on leadership roles in her church and is an integral part of its spiritual life.

I'm sure she'd love for Jesus to heal her from the MS and take it away. I'm sure she is looking forward to that day when this will actually happen when Christ will make all things new.

But in the meantime she lives and has found out the answer to our sermon series question: "How does God want me to live my life?" Stacy says: By making the very best out of it.

May you too find ways to live the healthiest you can be for God and his people. Amen.