

March 30, 2014
Deuteronomy 8:1 – 20

Rev. Jerry Deck

#digzpc Fasting

Our kids have been especially whiny recently. Wynn timer has been getting some teeth in, Shauny and Adelie haven't been feeling all that well, and they're all struggling with trying to fall asleep because it's still so light outside when we put them down. As we've tried to go places as a family the last couple weeks, our times out have been often shortened because of their breaking down in the middle of a meal or in the middle of Home Depot. There have been several times when Megan and I have looked at each other and, without words even needing to be said, know that we're asking the exact same question. The question that parents have certainly been asking for generations. "Why did we have these kids?"

But then this week I finally remembered why it is that we had kids. The epiphany came not as I was watching them sleep peacefully or when they came running to greet me when I got home. No, it came as I was thinking about what kind of summer vacation we might take as a family and realized that our kids, especially the eldest, are getting to the age that we can go to amusement parks. I couldn't believe that I had almost forgotten that we had kids so we could start going to amusement parks again! The funnel cakes, the roller coasters, the log flume, the games; the sounds and smells that conjure up feelings of incredible joy and wonderful memories.

Now, I know you don't have to have kids or be a kid to go to amusement parks, but I do know that for me, at least, I just haven't made time to do those things since I hit adulthood. And so I'm incredibly excited about getting a chance to do that this summer. As I thought about that more this week I was remembering the many trips I took to amusement parks when I was growing up. And many of those memories are going to amusement parks with my church youth group. Almost every year we would all cram into a church van or two and make the long trek, for us, to Six Flags in Atlanta. It was the most anticipated trip of the year and you could palpably feel our excitement.

And as we began to see the roller coasters off in the distance the volume in the van began to increase dramatically. We began yelling out what things we were going to do first, how many times we were going to ride a particular roller coaster, how many funnel cakes we were going to eat, how large of stuffed animal we were going to win and on and on we would go. By the time we parked the whole van was rocking with excitement and all of us were staring at the door, waiting for it to be open so that we could invade the promised land, so to speak. But just before we exploded out of the van with infinite adolescent energy, the youth pastor would turn around and wait for us all to be silent. It was everything we could do to be still, and yet we knew that until we were, we wouldn't be set free.

And in that moment, as we sat on the precipice of absolute delight, the youth pastor gave us a remembrance talk. Remember, he would say, that you are always to have someone else with you. Remember what time we are to meet together for lunch. Remember who your adult chaperone is. Remember what time we said we are leaving. And after all those things he would cap it off by saying, "Remember who you are reflecting today. Not just yourself or your family or Richards Memorial United Methodist Church. You are reflecting God. I hope that how you act today will make it clear that you are disciples of Jesus." And with that the door would be open, we would begin drinking in the joy that was Six Flags over Georgia and we would promptly forget 95% of what the youth pastor had told us.

I bring all that up this morning, because in many ways this "before you get out of the van and into Six Flags" speech is exactly what is happening in our Deuteronomy text. The Israelites have been chomping at the bit for 40 years, wandering around in the wilderness and waiting to enter the Promised Land. Finally, they've arrived, but before God allows them to open up the van door and cross over the Jordan to eat all the funnel cakes they want, he gives them a talk about remembering. About remembering where they've come from, how they used to be hungry. About remembering who has provided for them, who has always been there with them. About remembering who they are and who the Lord is and that those things can never be confused. And why was God doing this? Because God knew that there was a good chance, a great chance, perhaps a 95% chance, that as soon as they entered into this new land, full of incredible things and opportunities, that they would forget everything that they had been through, that they would forget God.

What God knew, as someone has put it, is that affluence easily leads to amnesia. When they were hungry the Israelites felt, in a remarkably poignant way, just how dependent they were on God. When they awoke to manna, they rejoiced because God had provided for them. But now they were entering a land that had wheat, barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranates, olive trees and honey in great abundance. And when you are surrounded by great abundance, it is easy to forget just how dependent you are on anyone but yourself. If you're hungry you just pick off an olive or a fig or make something from the vats of wheat that surround you. It is this fascinating irony, as Walter Brueggemann points out, that the more gifts you have been given, the easier it is to forget the gift-giver. The easier it is to begin thinking, as God tells the Israelites in verse 17, that what they have around them, what they have acquired has come from their own hand.

Thankfully, that's not something that we have to wrestle with! That's a joke, of course. Because while I haven't seen a bunch of vines or pomegranates or olive trees or barley around here, I have seen numerous Marshes and Targets and Costcos and Wal-Marts and McDonald's and Outbacks and Olive Gardens and . . . well, you get the picture. It is so easy for most of us to forget that what we have actually comes from somewhere, that it doesn't just appear in grocery stores and restaurants. I think about the difference in understanding this between my mother and me. She grew up on a farm where there was the daily reminder of where food has come from, the daily reminder of how dependent they were on the sun and rain, the daily reminder of their dependence on God. Meanwhile, I rarely if ever think about these things, I just go and throw food in a shopping cart or order what I want from a waiter. I don't care if it's raining or sunny or hailing because, for

the most part, I still get what I want. I don't have these daily reminders, I am not forced to remember each day just how dependent we are on where things have come from and, more importantly, on the God who has provide them. And, without question, that shapes us. Without question, when we live in a land of abundance, it is so much easier to forget. Which again, is why God made such a deliberate speech before the Israelites entered into their land of abundance.

Of course the hard thing for most of us is that we were born into this land of abundance. Most of us don't remember being hungry or thirsty or being fearful that we wouldn't have clothes on our backs or a house to live in. Oh we might not always get to eat exactly what we want or have the exact clothes we prefer or live in the house we have dreamed of, but we have *something*. And the question that perhaps we all too often fail to ask is how does that reality shape how we understand our lives and, more importantly, God. Because, make no mistake about it, our affluence (and honestly almost all of us in America are affluent in the grand scheme of our world) does shape us. The question is whether we are cognizant of it and whether or not we allowing it to give us amnesia.

So the question is, "How do we make sure we are not forgetting God because of our affluence?" The easiest answer, of course, is to simply give it all away. And I'm not going to say you shouldn't do that, because I have a feeling many of us (myself included) should probably be giving a lot of what we have away. But God doesn't tell the Israelites to go and chop down the olive and fig trees or burn the wheat, though he does warn them that if they forget they will perish, which should wake all of us up. What God does is simply keep telling us to remember, to remember, to remember.

So, how do we do that? We've discussed before that I think it takes more than just trying to forces ourselves intellectually to remember. That doesn't work for most of us. And as I reflected on this a bit more I began thinking about a particular part of this Deuteronomy passage that is probably the most well known. It's in verse three where God reminds the people that they don't "live by bread alone." Now where else in scripture do we hear that line? Yes, this is the passage that Jesus uses when Satan tempts him. And this temptation occurs right after Jesus has gone through the waters of baptism. And he is where? In the wilderness. And what has he been doing? Not eating. And for how long? 40 days and nights. It is this fascinating parallel to Deuteronomy where the Israelites, after they went through the waters of the Red Sea, were in the wilderness and hungry and were there for 40 years. What we see going on here is that Jesus is re-enacting that time, if you will. But Jesus, of course, does a much better job than the Israelites of listening to God the Father, of remembering what is important, of remembering who provides and so he doesn't give into Satan's temptation.

And I think what's important for us to see is that Jesus has intentionally put himself in this position of hunger (aka fasting) as a way, it seems to me, of remembering upon whom we are dependent. Scripture gives several reasons for fasting, but one of them, as Richard Foster points out, is to remind us that we are sustained, not by bread alone, but by God. More than merely thinking about it, hunger has this remarkable way of stopping us and

forcing us to refocus and to remember how we are living and to remember how easily we take things for granted and forget that everything, including food, is a gift from God.

About a year and a half ago we moved to Grove City, Pennsylvania, and I have to admit I was not in a good place. The organization I had been leading had failed, we had two young kids with another one just 6 weeks away from being born, we were living in what felt like the middle of nowhere and I was a year and a half away from being 40. Needless to say, this was not exactly what I had pictured a few years earlier. So, I did what many of us do in those kinds of situations. I started eating. Before I knew it I basically had one pair of pants I could wear and I could hear the button groaning every time I put them on.

I'd seen these commercials for WW-online that were catered toward men. No touchy-feely groups you had to go to and no one even had to know. So I started on it. And so, based on your height and weight they give you a certain amount of points you can eat each day and every piece of food is worth a certain amount. As I recall I started out with about 36 points I could have each day. I think the first day I polished off those 36 points by about 10 in the morning. It was amazing how quickly I ran through them.

But one of the things I noticed during this time was that before I had been on this diet plan I never even thought about what I was eating. If I was hungry I just grabbed something that was there. If I wasn't hungry, but there was something around that looked good, I just ate it. I was simply consuming food, without giving a second's thought to it. But all of a sudden when I began what I called my lifestyle change each piece of food counted. Before I bit into that cookie I had to decide whether or not I was willing to give away those 4 points that the cookie would cost me. That's 11% of what I could eat all day! My aforementioned grande, sugar-free vanilla non-fat no water chai tea latte from Starbucks, was 8 points. That's nearly a quarter of what I could have a day. What I noticed happening was that, because I was hungry and knew I had a limited amount of food that I could have, each thing I ate became incredibly precious. There I was eating every crumb of cookie off the napkin it was on and literally licking clean the chai I was drinking. I was amazed in this time at how hunger changed the way I saw not just food, but so many things. It was this incredibly stark reminder that, as Marjorie Thompson says as she discusses fasting, too often we don't see things like food as gifts to be enjoyed in moderation and gratitude, but as objects of consumption that are oftentimes used to fill emotional voids. This time on Weight Watchers was like a few months of mini-fasting that changed not just my waistline, but my whole mindset, forcing me to not just blindly live my life consuming, but to be more cognizant of the gifts around me and the gift-giver who had provided them.

So, not surprisingly, our homework (for those who are medically able to do so) is to fast, and more specifically, to fast for two consecutive meals. As I said earlier, there are several different reasons for why we fast, but my hope is that this week our fast will be one in which we allow the hunger that we feel to be a distinct reminder, as it was to the Israelites long ago, of the reality of our dependence on God and God alone. That each pang of hunger will make us more vibrantly aware of how easily we forget the gifts that surround us. So that, when we break the fast, we will savor each bite and be shaped into a people who do

not merely consume, but who remember and celebrate how God has provided for us. And if we can make this discipline of fasting into a part of our practice of life, I am convinced that it will not only change how we see food, but how we see life. That perhaps we will live out more richly the words of the psalmist who says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Let us not allow our affluence to lead amnesia, but may we hunger in such a way that we are reminded that we truly do not live by bread alone. May it be so. Amen.