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bible+study



By Belton Joyner, Jr.

February 1, 2015
Text: Daniel 1:5, 8-17;
Matthew 6:16-18
"Feasting and Fasting"

Sunday School teacher: "Who knows what 'fasting' means?" Kindergartner: "I think it means to eat as much as you can as quickly as you can...you know, fast!"

Uh, not quite. If the Sunday School student were to look up "fast" in a dictionary (that's one of those big books with lots of words in it; people used to use them before the Internet replaced them)...but, I stray...if the Sunday School student were to look up "fast" in a dictionary, the child would discover that the English word "fast" meaning "rapid" and the English word "fast" meaning "ab-

stain from food" come from different places in Old English. (This multi-purpose word "fast" can also mean "hold tight," but that's another story.)

It would not be surprising for a youngster, even one raised in the church, to misunderstand what "fasting" means. We don't do much fasting anymore! John Wesley recognized fasting as a means of grace, one of the ways God uses to bring spiritual nourishment. Fasting was certainly a more common practice in the earlier days of following Jesus (Matthew 6:16-18, Mark 2:20, Luke 4:2, Acts 13:2, Acts 14:23, 2 Corinthians 11:27).

The story in Daniel was probably written many years (maybe as many as four hundred years) after the events it depicts (Daniel 1:3-21). The writer wanted to encourage the Jewish people of his day by giving this account

of some faithful young Hebrew men from an earlier time. (Don't we do the same thing when we tell stories about George Washington throwing a coin across the Potomac River, using a legend from "back then" to inspire us today?) Daniel and his companions stayed away from the king's rich, non-kosher food (Daniel 1:12) in order to eat ritually-approved food. What impresses me is that not only did they agree to do this, they had faith enough say "You'll see the results in ten days" (Daniel 1:13). That's trust!

Matthew remembers Jesus' warning about making a big deal about fasting (Matthew 6:16). Note that Jesus does not say "If you fast;" He says "When you fast." He expected his disciples to undertake this spiritual discipline.

Fasting: Old Testament, New Testament, church's historic practice. That

doesn't leave us many places to hide!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Introduction to Christian Liturgy (Fortress Press), Frank C. Senn has written: "...Christian fasting has traditionally been accompanied by the other disciplines of prayer and almsgiving."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord, take away what's in the way..."

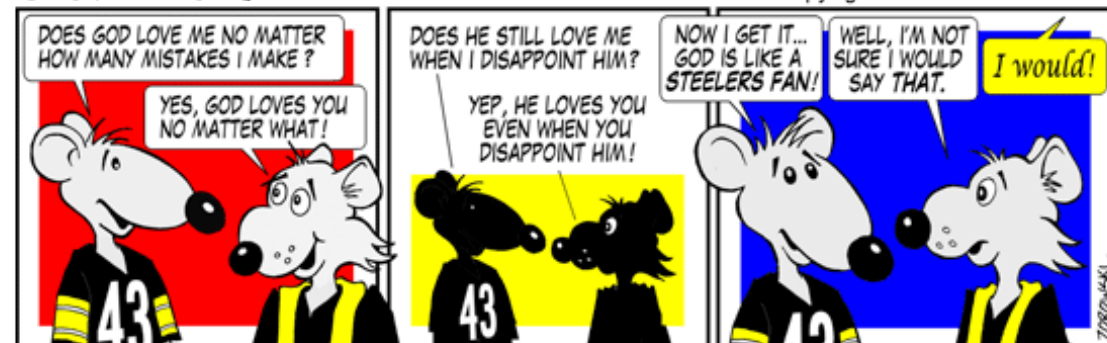
February 8, 2015

Text: Luke 10:25-37
"Serving Neighbors,
Serving God"

It's funny how when I read a very familiar story, all of a sudden something jumps out that I had not seen before. This account (Luke 10:25-37) is surely a well-known text. Even persons outside the Christian faith can make knowledgeable



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reference to “the good Samaritan.” But there is something here about which I had not thought.

When the lawyer asked how he might inherit eternal life, Jesus did what he often did: He answered a question with a question. “What is written in the law?” (Luke 10:26) Jesus was pleased when the man answered “Love God and love neighbor” (Luke 10:27).

The lawyer presses the point: “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) Then Jesus tells a story about the Samaritan who helped an injured man.

Here’s what just occurred to me: There was a two-sided answer—love God and love neighbor. However, the lawyer only asked about “who is my neighbor?” Why didn’t he ask “Who is God?”

Did he assume he knew all he needed to know about God? Did he think that he could trick Jesus with the “neighbor” question? Did he conclude that loving God and loving neighbor were one and the same thing? Did he actually ask about God, but Luke did not think it was important enough to include? Or maybe Luke left it out so focus could be on the harder question about neighbor.

The answer to all these ques-

tions is “I don’t know.” What I do know is how the Church answers the question “Who is God?” Look at John 1:14. Look at Colossians 1:19. Look at Ephesians 1:3-4. Look at Isaiah 40:5. Look at Luke 1:43. Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at the incarnated Word, Jesus.

What Someone Else Has Said:

James W. Moore tells a story (Come on Home, Abingdon Press): “The little boy came home from Sunday School. He had studied the parable of the good Samaritan. When someone asked, ‘What did you learn?’ he replied, ‘I learned that when I’m in trouble somebody ought to help me.’ He missed the whole point; and so often, so do we.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God whose mercy and grace precede us into all of our tomorrows, You have shown us that mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. With thanksgiving, we accept that gift. With gratitude, we seek now to live out that presence in the way we treat our neighbors. We know who You are because of Jesus; we know who our neighbor is because of Jesus...”

February 15, 2015
Text: Matthew 25:31-46
“Serving the Least”

Some time ago, I read a “letter to the editor” in which a man was explaining why he had joined a particular church. He wrote, “I went to a lot of churches that told me that God loved me. At this church, they told me that God loved me, but then asked, ‘What are you going to do about it?’” This text is Matthew’s answer to that question.

Although Jesus gave this picture in the strange imagery of apocalyptic language (see other examples in the Book of Revelation and in the Book of Daniel), the message is straightforward: how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the unclothed, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matthew 25:42-43, 37-39) is how we treat Jesus. Our Lord echoes what Proverbs 19:17 says: “Those who are gracious to the poor lend to the Lord, and the Lord will fully repay them.”

Isaiah 58:6-8 is a powerful anticipation of Jesus’ injunction: “...setting free the mistreated...sharing your bread...bringing the homeless poor into your house...covering the naked.” James 1:27 restates

this theme: “True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.”

It is hard to ignore Matthew 25:32: “All the nations will be gathered in front of him...” Some first century Jewish people would have had a hard time believing that God could use non-Jews—Gentiles—to do good deeds. Doing good “to the least and the lost” makes for some strange bedfellows! In the Wesleyan tradition, we speak of this as “prevenient grace,” the universal gift of God’s presence even when it is not recognized or claimed.

Decisions about what is the most loving thing to do are not easy decisions. Is it better to give \$5 to the man with a poster saying “homeless” or is it better to give the \$5 to the homeless shelter? Is it better to give time in visiting prisoners or is it better to support a half-way house for those released from prison? Is it better to tutor a third grader or is it better to provide a job for an impoverished college student? I struggle with answers to those dilemmas, but this I know: my answer

better recognize that it is Jesus with whom I am dealing.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Douglas Meeks wrote an article for the 2012 meeting of the Charles Wesley Society. Meeks wrote, “Who are the poor? This question can be answered in many different ways. But from the scriptural perspective of God’s working in our midst, the poor are those who are excluded from the conditions of life.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “I see you, Lord Jesus!...”

February 22, 2015
Text: Luke 11:1-13
“Ephesians 6:10-20
“Clothed and Ready”

This is the first Sunday of Lent. After the penitential and repentant spirit of Ash Wednesday, we move to this season of preparing for the full gift of Easter. No wonder the Church takes six weeks to get ready for Easter. There are, as Shakespeare said, a lot of “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” The writer of Ephesians—let’s call him Paul-- said the struggle is with “...spiritual powers of evil” (Ephesians 6:12).

You want to be ready because you never know when the “enemy” will attack. I went to college at a school that wears a darker shade of blue than the school eight miles down the road. In the fall of my freshman year, we were looking ahead to the showdown football game between the “two blues.” About 2:00 in the morning, there was a loud rapping on my dorm door, much shouting in the halls, and screams that we must get to the parking lot to defend our turf against invading hordes from Chapel Hill. “They are on their way now, ready to paint and vandalize our campus. We must go meet them!” Sleepily, my roommate and I joined the other freshmen who had been commandeered to defend Dear Alma Mater. We stood in the dark parking lot, looking vainly to see the attackers. Finally, a car came careening into the lot. We braced ourselves. This was it! The car screeched to a halt and from it jumped out two Duke cheerleaders. They proceeded to lead us in some rousing cheers—at least as well as one can rouse a cheer at 2:00 a.m.—and then told us that the crisis had passed and, having done our duty, we could go back to bed.

If it had happened again, I doubt we would have stirred to “defend the portals” from

some imaginary enemy. That same attitude might well be why we have a hard time taking seriously Paul’s insistence that we “make a stand against the tricks of the devil.”—no pun intended—(Ephesians 6:11). Just where is it that we are likely to encounter “forces of cosmic darkness” (Ephesians 6:12)? Why bother with all this preparation—armor, belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet (Ephesians 6:13-15)—if it is just a false alarm?

When Paul “comes down the ladder of abstraction,” he identifies places we might encounter these temptations to give in to the powers of evil. Guess where! In family relationships (Ephesians 5:22-33). In parental interactions (Ephesians 6:1-4). In contacts with those with whom you work (Ephesians 6:5-9). In getting along with folks with whom we disagree (Ephesians 4:31-32).

Oops. It is no false alarm. We need to prepare: truth (6:14), righteousness/justice (6:14), peace (6:15), faith (6:16), salvation (6:17), and the Spirit, which is the word of God (6:17).

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Leadership Without Easy Answers (Belknap), Ronald Heifetz says, “The evil...lives in the routine ways in which people throughout the system collude in maintaining a dysfunctional status quo.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Walk with me in this Lenten journey...”

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VIP Report

WALTON, Mary Jane, widow of William Carlisle Walton, Jr., died Nov. 5. A memorial service was held Nov. 10 in Cary.

GARNER, Clarence (Fairway District: retired) died Dec. 10. The funeral was held on Dec. 13 at Tabernacle UMC in Robbins.

WAGGONER, James (Capital District: retired) died Dec 14. A Service of Death and Resurrection was held on Dec 21, at St. Marks UMC, Raleigh.

MENTZER, Jo Ann, wife of James Mentzer (Capital District: extension ministry) died Jan. 9. A memorial service was held Jan. 16 at Knightdale UMC.

NELSON, Sheryl Runge, wife of Mike Nelson (Fairway District: Lillington) died Jan. 11. A memorial service was held on Jan. 15 at Sandy Grove UMC in Lumber Bridge, NC.

STONE, Amos Henry (Gateway District: retired) died Jan. 18. A memorial service was held Jan. 24 in Fayetteville.

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