

No One Like Jesus: More Than A Meal
By Jason Huff
April 3, 2016
Isaiah 58:1-10; Joel 2:12-19; Matthew 9:14-17

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 9:14-17. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.””

Rituals are a huge part of our lives. I like to think of myself as “going with the flow,” not requiring much structure in my life. But I still have morning rituals. I shower every day whether or not I smell. I brush my teeth. I eat breakfast. When I miss one of those rituals, everything seems off. We’re so in the habit of praying before a meal that, if we miss it, it’s weird. I don’t know that every prayer we say before a meal means a lot, but we still feel like we should say it.

We just got done celebrating one of the biggest rituals of the year in Easter. We plant Easter eggs for the kids to find. I have no idea why. As far as I know, they have nothing to do with the resurrection of Jesus; it’s just the way it’s always been done. Same with Christmas trees and wreaths and lights; same with hot dogs and hamburgers on the 4th of July and (at least since I moved to Detroit) punchkies at Ash Wednesday. We assign meaning to these rituals, but they rarely mean the same thing to us as they did for those who started them.

We’re moving back to our study of Matthew’s gospel this week, and this may be a strange passage to hit right after Easter. It comes a long time before the events of the week we just celebrated – Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. But this passage gets to the heart of what Jesus has done for us through His death and resurrection. It shows us how Jesus changed every religious paradigm forever.

In the passage right before this one, Jesus dined with Matthew the tax collector and a bunch of his friends who were on the bottom rung of the spiritual ladder. This was wrong, according to the religious leaders, and they spoke out against Jesus eating with notorious sinners. Jesus told them, “I came as a doctor for the sick, not the healthy.” He came to provide the cure for all who would come to Him, admit their sickness from sin, and turn from it.

Word gets around that Jesus is eating with some nefarious types, and it goes beyond the Pharisees. It gets back to the disciples of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was notorious in a different way from Jesus; he was an ascetic. He lived on virtually nothing, and so did John’s disciples. Their lifestyle was one of extreme self-denial. When they heard that Jesus – the one John has proclaimed is the Messiah – is going to dinner parties and eating with scruffy sinners, they wonder, what’s going on? Is Jesus really a hedonist in disguise? Can He be God’s son?

So they start asking questions. Why is it that Jesus' disciples don't fast? To us, this is a weird question, because fasting is so far outside our typical realm of experience. We're more likely to ask, *why did those guys fast?* What's the deal?

For John's disciples and the Pharisees, fasting was a ritual, a means by which to please God. The Pharisees were very proud of themselves because they fasted twice a week, and they made a big show of it so that everyone would know they were suffering for the Lord. It's unlikely that John's disciples made it known they were fasting – they were doing it out of repentance. Yet they still followed the old patterns. You fasted to become more aware of your sin. You fasted to repent so that God would hear your prayers. The ritual was engrained in them as “the right thing to do.”

Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.” Jesus uses an analogy from His culture about wedding festivities. A wedding party lasted a whole week, and the bride and groom's family and friends would celebrate for days on end. Families who had virtually nothing would still scrimp and save and sacrifice to make this a huge occasion enjoyed by the whole community.

To fast during a wedding feast would not only be kind of lunacy, seeing how food was so scarce, but it would have been a grave insult to the whole wedding party and the family. And why would you fast? You only had this chance to celebrate this way with someone you loved, to rejoice with them, to share with them in their joy of being united to their beloved.

Jesus is our bridegroom. He is the One prepared for us, His church, His bride. In a surprising and mysterious way, we are both guests at the wedding and part of the bride itself. We celebrate with Jesus that we all – all believers – are united to Him for all time. The Holy Spirit is sent to use that we might have union with Christ even now, even in our time on earth, preparing us for the union that is still yet to be, that perfect link between us in eternity that we can barely begin to fathom.

And the disciples got to be a part of this firsthand. They got to experience the joy of being Jesus' companions every day for years. They learned from Him; they travelled with Him, experiencing His joys and sorrows. They were constantly in His presence. So why fast? Why go through the hardship of fasting in the presence of God the Son, who celebrates with you? You can't get closer to God than when He is right with you, eating and drinking with you, laughing with you, praying to the Father on your behalf while He is standing beside you. Fasting to try and experience more of the presence of God makes no sense when He is in your midst.

Jesus does give a caveat. “When the bridegroom is taken from them, then they will fast.” Jesus knew the day was coming when He would give Himself over to be sacrificed for our sins. Even though Jesus was gone from them only three days, the sorrow in their hearts is readily apparent in the gospels. And fasting became important again after Jesus ascended into heaven. Jesus said His disciples would fast in the Sermon on the Mount. In the book of Acts, the church fasts on a couple of occasions, and we'll talk about that in a minute. So it's not that fasting would go away completely, but a paradigm shift was about to take place.

That paradigm shift is what His example of patches and garments and wineskins is about. This was always a really hard parable for me to understand because I've always lived with preshrunk fabrics and cheap clothes where if something ripped really badly, you just threw it away. These days, if you go to a tailor with a badly damaged pair of pants, you'll pay over half the cost of the pants and they'll still look bad at the end.

But in an era when the average person owned two pieces of clothing, everyone got it. They knew that you couldn't take new cloth and just sew it onto the old. When the cloth ages, it shrinks, and then it pulls away the stitching and maybe even the old fabric. Only old patches work on old garments and new patches on new garments.

In the same way, I didn't think much about wine because the only time I see wine is in a grocery store, in a bottle, maybe in a box, I guess. What's the problem with putting new wine in an old wineskin? The issue is fermentation. When wine ages, it releases gases as the wine gains more alcoholic content. Those gases stretch a wineskin, and the wineskin loses its elasticity. It can't stretch anymore. You put new wine in that wineskin, and the gases will reach the edge, there's no elasticity left in the wineskin, and poof! A hole breaks through and pretty soon you have a soggy floor and no wine. The only way to age new wine is to put it into a new wineskin.

Even if we understand the concepts, we still might not understand Jesus' meaning. It comes down to this: because Jesus has come into the world, because He came to teach us, to be with us, to pay the penalty for our sins and adopt us into the family of God, everything has changed. The old religious paradigms, even if they did work once, don't work now, not in the same way. For now, there is no doubt that God is among His people, He has visited us, and even now lives with us and within us through the Holy Spirit.

The real change that Jesus brings is relationship instead of ritual. There are tons of passages in the Old Testament that teach us that God wants relationship from His people and obedience to His heart rather than dead ritual, and we heard them this afternoon from Isaiah and Joel. In Isaiah, God doesn't ask the people for a fast. If you want to draw near to me, God says, the fast I want from you is to take care of your workers, to feed the hungry, to give a home to the homeless, and to stop your wicked ways. Joel 2, God says, don't go through with the ritual of ripping your clothes to show you want my attention! Instead, rip your hearts – open them up to me and to justice for those among you that you oppress! Be in relationship with me and with one another, and then I'll be there to strengthen you. As much as God tells us this in the Old Testament era, He is still not present in the same way that He is when Jesus comes among us. And still, for centuries, ritual ruled the day in Jewish thought.

But God's new paradigm is relationship. Believe in Jesus, the One the Father has sent. Trust in Him and trust Him. He comes as one of us so that we can relate to Him. He comes among us so we can know God up close and personal. We can love Him not as some distant being but the God who draws near to His people in a very real and literal way. While Jesus' death satisfied the ritualistic requirements of sacrifice, His offering of His life was deeply personal and relational. He died not only to fulfill what was necessary to satisfy the wrath of God on sin, He died to give us life. He died to give us a relationship with Himself.

This turns the idea of fasting on its head. Fasting quickly became a ritual for the church; by the middle of the second century, fast days were already common among Christians. The later church calendar had fast days all the time. The ritual unfortunately returned. But that's not what we see in the Bible in the book of Acts. When the church fasts in Acts – and it's only mentioned twice – it is when they are seeking the Lord's will for His church to expand and grow, and when they placed elders over the churches to care for them and their spiritual growth. They aren't fasting over sin; they are fasting that God's presence would be deeply known among them and that His will would be done in His church.

What does this passage mean for us? Should we fast? The answer is “yes,” but Easter brings about a paradigm shift to fasting. Fasting isn't about making ourselves worthy. It isn't something we do to bring about God's pleasure with us, and it's not a ritual. We shouldn't feel bad if we don't give up something during the season before Easter.

Fasting is something we can do when what Jesus said reflects our spiritual state. Is the bridegroom with us? Because of the Holy Spirit, at times in our lives, we do feel very close to Jesus. We feel His peace and presence and love. He seems near. The bridegroom is close. At these times, there is no need to fast. We simply enjoy His presence.

But at times, the bridegroom seems far away. Sometimes it's because of sin in our lives; sometimes it's because of struggles and sorrows we're going through. Sometimes God doesn't feel very close. Or maybe it's not that He's far away, but we really need to feel certain of His presence. In times like we see in Acts, we need the awareness that God is with us. When we are going out on a limb or doing something very important in Jesus' church, we want to know His guiding hand in a way we don't everyday. These are excellent times to fast.

Fasting in these circumstances isn't ritualistic. It isn't the “right way to fast” if we don't eat or drink anything all day, or if we fast from sunup to sundown, or if we drink but don't eat. God knows our hearts. It isn't about pride in fasting or doing it to gain God's favor. It's all about seeking the heart and company of Jesus our bridegroom. It's about returning to His side if we have, in our own weakness, gotten away from His path. It's about drawing nearer to Him than we normally experience. It's about seeking Him desperately when we know we need His power and peace in our circumstances. Fasting makes us aware of our need for God, our dependence upon Him, and how only He can truly fulfill the longings in our hearts. We should fast more often, and it's worth doing as we go into a new phase of reaching our community.

But the exciting thing about this passage is that we are no longer stuck in the old patterns and old ways. We are free to follow in the footsteps of Jesus our friend and beloved through a relationship with Him. In Jesus, we recognize that fasting or not fasting is about far more than a meal; it's all about drawing near to God, who loves us and gives His very self for us.

I had never really thought about how deadly ritual can be to our spiritual life until an incredible learning experience I had this week. Jackson's 7th grade class has been studying different religions, learning about faiths outside of Christianity. On Thursday, I went with his class over the Temple Beth-El in Bloomfield Hills. It's a Jewish congregation of the Reform tradition; it's the oldest Jewish congregation in Detroit, and it is the largest Reform Jewish congregation in the United States.

The facility is gorgeous. It was designed by a world-famous Japanese architect who incorporated numerical concepts of the Jewish faith into the building itself – such as forty panes of glass in the skylights to represent the forty days of rain in the flood and the forty years of Israel's wandering in the desert.

We spent most of our time in a smaller chapel, where the docent brought out a Torah scroll for us to see. He explained in great and even gruesome detail how the Torah was made from the hides of kosher animals, how the scribe would count every letter and make sure every one was accounted for. He told us how the ritual of lighting the candles on Shabbat was so important, that you could never light the candles before reciting the prayers or reading the Torah because lighting a candle on Shabbat would be considered work, against the commandment. Ritual made up a great deal of the presentation.

And yet when it came to the actual faith of folks in the Reform Jewish movement, there was much less to be said. They took the Torah to be so sacred, you can't even touch it with your hand – but Reform Jews don't believe that any of the commandments of the Law are binding on them anymore. They believe that the Torah was a compilation of historical stories about the history and warfare and enslavement and freedom of their ancestors.

They say they are supposed to share God's message with the world, but the docent never said what that message was. Reading their prayer book, it's clear every person in the Reform Jewish movement has their own opinion about God and what God is doing, each one considered valid. There were tons of rituals and rulekeeping, elements just like the fasts the Pharisees kept twice a week. But there was very little about meeting God or honoring Him or knowing Him.

When you don't know the bridegroom, when you have no expectation of a wedding feast for the One who died and rose for you, ritual is all you've got. That made me very sad for them, and hopeful that some of them might find the Messiah that was sent to their people first, Jesus, Himself a Jew, who came that first and foremost, God's chosen people throughout the centuries might find their hope in Him.

Are there rituals we think will please God in our lives? Do we study the Bible or come to church out of habit? Or do we do it so that we might know God's love in our lives more, that we might experience more of Jesus' presence through the power of the Holy Spirit? The bridegroom lives even now and comes among us by the Holy Spirit's work. Will we rely on dead rituals, or will we find our hope in the living Christ who wants us to draw near to Him?