

Delivered on July 12, 2020 by Rev. Dr. Fred G. Garry, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen

A Rolls Royce pulls to a stop. In the back seat you see a man in a suit and tie eating his lunch. There is a linen tablecloth, silver, china, crystal. Another Rolls Royce pulls up beside him. There is a man in back seat as well; he too is dining. The second one leans toward the window and asks the other, “Excuse me, have you any Grey Poupon?”

With a great look of indignance the man answers, “But of course!” And drives away.

Such a great commercial. It came out when I was in high school. My mother used Grey Poupon on pastrami sandwiches that she made for my school lunch. A hard way I had of it.

In 1981, when the Grey Poupon mustard commercial aired and my mother significantly increased the value of pastrami, there was great change afoot. The popularity of that commercial was much more than mustard. In the 1980s a food revolution gained momentum.

As a boy growing up there were two types of mustard. French’s Yellow and the store brand of cheaper yellow mustard imitating French’s. Today if you go to a grocery store there will be no less than thirty-to-forty different mustards. That is a great change. In our house we put out at least six different mustards to adorn your hotdog. Mustard with horseradish, with jalapenos, brown, stone, Dijon, and the classic yellow.

I am a foodie. Full confession. I am not the foodie who wants to know if my chicken was raised on a specific farm, the name of the chicken, and a brief bio of the farmers who raised said bird. But I cried when Anthony Bourdain died. Absolutely. And I don’t prefer cold cuts; I like charcuterie; the stinkier the cheese, the better.

I keep an herb garden for the summer and love to create herb relishes with fresh cucumber and champagne vinegar, spread the relish on roasted eggplant with feta cheese, Bulgarian feta if you have it. Potato salad is an invitation to explore the cupboard for what might be added. The promise of a true Niçoise salad will render me docile and fill my imagination with thoughts of conversation and no need to hurry.

And to think, all this started with mustard. Well, mustard and Alice Waters and farm-to-table and local source and homemade bread and wine other than Gallo and cheese not from a can.

There is a lovely book called, *The United States of Arugula*. The book describes the path we took from growing up on farms to the depression where we canned everything or bought everything in cans; to the post-WWII time of the frozen food and then the tragic microwave dinner.

Again, I am a foodie but no purist. Truffles? Meh. But give me mushrooms and a very good bottle of marsala (and this is a secret all should know: there is really good marsala out there), give me mushrooms, fresh rosemary, butter and some shallots, o heaven. But I’ll use the grocery marsala if that is what is handy; I will add some extra butter though.

This is a long way of saying, I am a big fan of fasting. Fasting, big fan.

To love food is not only to enjoy the taste of a dish, it is also to understand the body and what food means to it. And there is probably no better way of understanding our bodies than fasting.

Fasting is both an ancient practice and modern fad. Fasting is trending right now. My general practitioner at my last annual check-up spent most of our visit talking about his current practice of fasting. He likes to fast a couple days a week, gives him energy he said. A bit of protein was all he needed in between. And wine, he confessed. Wine after work was needed especially with patients like me.

Fasting was studied by the Nazis and the Soviets. Their great discoveries will always be tainted by their ugly methods and unwilling subjects, but they did discover interesting things about fasting. Fasting has a curative effect. And it can be done for forty days and nights. Hence when Jesus fasted out in the desert for forty days and forty nights it was not a glimpse of divine power, but a human limit. He fasted as long as humanly possible; it may have been the strength to endure temptation.

Food, it turns out, makes us happy, and being really full of food brings a happiness that is sloppy and bleary eyed very diminished in our ability to resist temptation. We don't say, "what is one more" at the beginning of an evening. Fasting has the opposite effect; it gives you power and sharpens your senses.

You have no doubt heard the phrase, the starving artist. Some assume this is because artists tend to be poor, which is true. But the phrase starving artist is the process of starving yourself as a part of a creative endeavor. This is the value of the "all-nighter" without food, the cigarettes and coffee of the painter sequestered. There is a clarity that comes without food.

Just to be clear, there is no clarity in famine or food insecurity. Fasting is not being hungry; fasting is a discipline wherein we gain control of our body and how it relates to our soul. When you fast, you see how much your body speaks, demands, guides, and determines our actions.

One of the greatest challenges we have today in our diet, in our bodies, is a misunderstanding of obesity. Obesity is rampant and we seek to combat it. Yet, we fail because we miss the real disease. The disease is blindness. We are blind about our bodies; obesity is just a glaring symptom of our blindness about our earthiness, our embodiment of the earth.

Before I say this, I need to apologize. If you love someone named Adam, please don't take offense at what I am about to say. And if you are named Adam take comfort that you have a cool nickname. Adam was not a name at first. Adam was a name holder, a category, a kind of working title.

God made the first human, Adam. But God didn't say, "let's call him Adam," as Genesis records of Eve. No. Adam means, literally dustling, earthling, one from dirt. The dust, the earth, the dirt in Hebrew is Adamah. Hence, Adam is like Matt is to Matthew, or Rich is to Richard. It's a nickname, a diminutive. Adam of the Adamah.

There is no moment where God says, "Adam." God speaks to the earthling, to the one of the dust, to the one who will farm the garden because the one from the dirt is to till the dirt. Adam of the Adamah. After Cain kills Abel and Seth is born, the writer of Genesis begins to refer to the earthling as Adam as a name, but God doesn't. God created an earthling from the soil to tend the earth.

This is one of the greatest theological truths we need to hear today. We are people, earthlings, dustlings created to tend, to plow, to cultivate the earth. We were created to tend a garden. It would be fitting to call Adam farmer, gardener, caretaker. It is no coincidence that Mary Magdalene confused the risen Jesus with a gardener.

Curious fact, Abraham Lincoln called upon the nation three times during the Civil War to fast for a day. The fast was intended to clarify our common sin. He states this very clearly. We are being punished, he wrote, and we need to repent, to fast, to humble ourselves before the Almighty if we are ever going to come out of this tragedy. In 1861, 1863, and 1864, Lincoln said, let us fast together for a day.

In our reading today, we find the third great discipline of a faithful life. Jesus bid his disciples to give in secret, to pray in secret, and to fast in secret. If you remember from a few weeks ago, secret means from the depth of your heart, the inner crypt, the sanctum sanctorum of the soul. And three times he promises a reward in secret. But, here again, the Latin word, reward, fails us a bit. Recompense would be closer; attention might be the best translation. God will attend to your body, your soul, and give you a right spirit. That is the fruit of the great disciplines. God attends to us. After Jesus fasted the angels attended to him.

The word reward suggests cash, an economic transaction. But fasting is not about cash. The promise of discipline is God's attention, attending. That is the reward. I am not interested in God sending me money. I hope God attends to my soul in the way a good farmer pays attention to the soil, to the land, to the earth. The God who sees the depth will attend to the depth of who you are.

"Excuse me, have you any Grey Poupon?" "Well of course." And I do.

To be devoted to food, you need to learn to fast. Without fasting you will eat terrible processed food, gallons and gallons of corn syrup and freeze-dried preservative-filled pizzarinos.

Without control and attention of the body, we will get bigger gulps of soda pop, smother all things with sugar. Seeking happiness, we will continue to destroy the body.

I need to lose a few pounds. So far, in a year's, time I have lost twenty-five pounds by jogging. I need to lose about 75 more. I hope to do that. Yet, what I really hope to do is not a question of losing, but gaining. I want to gain control of my body. I have lost much more in the past, yet, I did without seeing what it means to attend to my body.

Without self-control, we live in chaos. Without discipline and obedience, we cannot tend the earth. That is the lesson of Adam of the Adamah. He failed to find control and it ruined him. Told not to, he ate the wrong food. I feel that we are living in such ruin, out of control chaos. We are once again feeling the weight of the being expelled from the garden.

My friend Drew, your pastor, reminded me of this not too long ago. The gospels, he said, need to be read in light of the ruin of Rome. Not the fall of the Roman Empire, but the ruin that came to people from the greed and power and violence of Rome. The Peace of Rome was a plenty that ruins.

Jesus' teachings must be heard with ears knowing the ruin Rome created. Jesus' call to fast is so like Lincoln's: a moment to find clarity and power in forgiveness and humility. A moment to begin again amidst chaos.

I hope we are not expelled from the garden. I hope not. I hope we navigate beyond the chaos and become the gardeners, the farmers, the caretakers God intended. To love the earth, to love each other, to even tend to our own soul in the way God tends to us. That is the promise, the good news of our lesson: if we gain this self-control, this understanding of the body, the one who knows the heart of heart will tend to us, and care for us. I cannot imagine a better promise. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

(Isaiah 58:1-5 NRSV) *Shout* out, do not *hold back!* *Lift* up your voice like a *trumpet!* *Announce* to my *people* their rebellion, to the *house* of *Jacob* their sins. Yet *day* after day they *seek* me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a *nation* that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their *God*; they ask of me *righteous* judgments, they *delight* to *draw* near to God.

“Why do we *fast*, but you do not see? Why *humble* ourselves, but you do not *notice*?” Look, you *serve* your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to *quarrel* and to *fight* and to *strike* with a wicked *fist*. Such fasting as you do *today* will not *make* your *voice* heard on *high*. Is such the fast that I *choose*, a day to humble oneself? Is it to *bow* down the *head* like a *bulrush*, and to *lie* in sackcloth and ashes? Will you *call* this a fast, a day *acceptable* to the *LORD*?