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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Psalm 51:1-18, 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>16</sup>“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. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>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. (Matthew 6:16-18, NRSV)

In this passage our Lord Jesus urges us away from false pride in our piety. In our sacrifices and spiritual disciplines, in our fasting, praying, and charitable giving, we should seek to tear ourselves away from the praises of earth and seek instead an even high audience: the praises of heaven. We should seek privacy of good deeds on earth in exchange for publicity in heaven, when the angels and archangels, saints and seraphim, and he who is Lord of all, even Jesus Christ himself, will survey our lives and pronounce to the world, “Well, done, thou good and faithful servant.” (Matthew 25:21)

## **A FIGHT FOR THE BODY**

Last springtime, I attended a theology conference which included a lecture by an Eastern Orthodox theologian who described the great care and reverence practiced by the Orthodox when it comes to the Holy Communion—even to the preparation of the Blessed Sacrament. He said this:

They use fresh bread. The preparation is scripted. Prayers are said as the bread is cut. There is a solemn procession moving the bread from the table of preparation to the altar. There is Confession before the Holy Communion. There is fasting from food and sex before the Holy Communion. Even crumbs are consumed. Schmemmann taught that fasting is a fight *for* the body, not against it. (Peter Bouteneff, *What To Do with This?*)

The mention here of Schmemmann refers to Fr. Alexander Schmemmann (1921-83), who was a famous Eastern Orthodox theologian. For much of his career he taught at St. Vladimir's Seminary, not far from here, in Crestwood, Westchester County.

To begin, let us note that if Schmemmann's theme is true—if fasting is a fight *for* the body—then we should not fast in such a way as to harm our bodies. I mean, for example, if you are hypoglycemic, then fasting does not mean that you should abstain from carbohydrates. Indeed, it means almost the reverse. Fasting means that you should be especially careful during this season of Lent to make sure you get enough glucose.

And if you are sleepy-headed on the job, from too much socializing the night before, fasting for you means getting some more sleep! Fasting is *for* the body, not against it.

Still, there is wisdom in the traditional teaching that fasting means giving up some things—things that might be innocent in themselves, but whose surrender signals that we are willing to offer even our bodies to God.

## THREE THOUGHTS

What I want to do in this sermon is to linger with Schmemmann's theme that "fasting is a fight *for* the body, not against it." Let's look at Schmemmann's saying from three angles:

- 1) First, the saying suggests that our bodies are in some danger. They need someone to fight for them. Furthermore, we ourselves should be part of that good fight.
- 2) Second, this good fight benefits not only us, but others in our lives too.
- 3) And third, this good fight for the body gives honor to our Lord Jesus, who fought with all his might, even to the point of death, for our bodies, that they might enjoy glory in eternity.

## FIRST, WE ARE IN SOME DANGER

So, first, the idea that fasting is a fight for the body means that our bodies are in some danger, and needs someone to stand up for them. Do you think that is true? I do. It seems to me that you are I are subject to disorder in our desires. We are the kind of creatures who can desire things too much or can desire things we ought not to have. And if we are not careful, we are going to do ourselves harm.

I know who the terrible author of this disorder is: he is Satan. He means us no good. I take quite literally the saying of the Bible about him:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:  
(1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

Perhaps Satan reveals his devilish nature no more prominently than this: that he is completely willing to commit sacrilege with something very precious to God: our bodies and their desires. Satan is willing to grab hold of our desires, intensify them, misdirect them, and confuse them, all with the intention of hurting us.

The result is that sometimes, daily life seems like trying to ride a wild bronco or trying to set sail in a tornado. It is said of the shepherd boy David that he fought with lion and bear in order to protect his flock. Well, in a similar way, you and I have to fight against *ourselves* simply to remain healthy and useful to the Lord. There is something wild and disorderly in us, and if we are not careful, it will do us harm. If we yield to these disorderly desires, we will eat too much, drink too much, play too much, and Satan will sit back with a big smile on his face as we trend downward. Fasting interrupts this! That's why it is important. The life of desire threatens to overrun us. Fasting breaks the momentum and surrenders our bodies back to God.

## **SECOND, FASTING HELPS OTHERS**

My second theme about fasting is that fasting can and ought to benefit our neighbors. It benefits *us*, yes, because it interrupts the winds of disordered desire and permits us to regain mastery of our bodies. But fasting also benefits other people in our lives.

This was an important theme in the preaching of the church fathers. They used to wonder, for example, how a Christian can bring himself to indulge in rich food and heavy sauces, overeating to the point of drowsiness, heaviness, and ill-health, while poor sisters and brothers in the Lord are shivering in their huts or on the streets with hardly enough food to keep them alive. Fast, they said, that you will have money left over to give to the poor.

Did you notice back when I was talking about how the Eastern Orthodox practice care and reverence the Holy Communion, that the theologian spoke of fasting not only from food, but also from sex? This fast too can and should benefit the neighbor. Fasting from sex, for example, can keep us from spoiling our friendships by introducing sex where it does not belong. Sex belongs in holy marriage.

In general, concerning our neighbors: fasting helps us to get life under control again, and that is likely to prove a blessing for our families and neighbors.

### **THIRD, FASTING HONORS JESUS**

My final thought about fasting is that it permits us in good concrete manner to express that we love the Lord even more than we love our own bodies. Fasting is a kind of physical confession that what Saint Paul said is true: that even our bodies belong to Jesus:

<sup>19</sup>Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup>you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

When I was a boy, for example, this was a decisive argument for me against smoking. The preacher said, “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.” He said that we ought not to harm the Lord’s temple. So, I did not smoke. And I think that it has proved to be a fast that is as Schmemmann said: it is a fast for the body, not against it.

This divine claim on the body has a kind of equity about it. In a way, it is fair and square. Saint Paul asks us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1, NRSV)

But when the apostles asks us to present our bodies as sacrifices to God, he means the God who offered his body and his blood to us, on the Cross, and continues to do so now, in the Blessed Sacrament. This fellowship in fasting, by which Jesus offers his body for us and we for him: this fellowship is what the traditional disciplines of Lent seek, that we will do our part in honoring the One who gave everything for us, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.