

## Feasting and Fasting

By Heather Cowie

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In our culture today we have a strange and twisted relationship with food. We have more of it than ever before and we are encouraged by every other advertisement to indulge. But we are also told that we ought to be thin and the other half of advertising tries to sell us the diet or the product that will help us lose weight. How do we live in this tug of war?

Food is a gift that we are meant to enjoy, but we too often live in an unbalanced relationship with it. Understanding feasting and fasting and the counter points they can be in our lives may help us move to a better place in our relationship with food, God and our neighbours.

Lauren Winner writes, "Food is part of God's creation. A right relationship with food points us toward Him." Too often in our lives our relationship with food has nothing to do with our relationship with God.

Feasting has always been part of the expression of faith in Judaism and Christianity, as well as other religions. "The feasts of Passover, and Unleavened bread, of Weeks (Pentecost) and the Feast of Booths were all celebrations of Yahweh's providence and expressed joy and thanksgiving to God" (L Shannon Jung)  
They were not small affairs and they lasted for days.

The main Christian feasts are Christmas, Easter and Sunday Dinner. Feasting is a communal experience and it should affect not only how we relate to God but also how we relate to one another.

The movie, *Babette's Feast*, tells the story of a great feast. It is about two devout sisters in a remote village in Denmark who live their lives for others. Their father had been a prophet and after his death, they continued his work. In their compassion they took into their home a French woman, a refugee, named Babette. She in turn helps them in their good works.

When we join the story, the sect that these women lead is in a crisis. They are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of their founder, but those

who remain faithful to the community are resentful, unhappy and inwardly uncharitable. Babette has asked to prepare the meal for the birthday celebration and Martina and Phillipa have reluctantly agreed. They warn their community that the dinner may be dangerous and all the people agree not to talk about the food.

A general, who was in love with Martina when they were young, joins the dinner at the last moment.

Movie clip 1: 71:13 – 74:50 - end after "And what a turtle soup"

The general is the first one who truly experiences the goodness of the feast that is being served. He expresses his appreciation and wonder while the others silently eat their meal. They cannot resist the influence of the beauty they are taking into themselves for long and soon they begin to enjoy the gifts before them. Not only do they begin to enjoy the food and wine, the goodness of what they are partaking in allows them to let go of their grudges, their fears and their discontent.

Clip 2: 80:02 – 81:20

Babette is the chef who "had the ability to transform a dinner into a kind of love affair. A love affair that made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite"

TRUE feasting connects our soul and body more fully to one another. Eating to excess only feeds our body while our soul starves but feasting involves a spiritual dynamic. When we feast we are mindful of the goodness of God's creation and the abundance of his provision for all our needs. We also feast with one another – it helps us build our relationships and strengthen our love for one another.

My small group has regular potlucks and one member recently said, "We should do more eating and less reading." Eating together has helped build a sense of community.

Clip 3: 96:48 – 98 - End after "Hallelujah"

Thomas Ryan in his book on fasting says, "Jesus and his followers do not fast. They feast, rather, as a sign of the banquet in the

kingdom of God at which the poor and the marginalized are the guests of honor. Sharing bread as a sign of solidarity with the disadvantaged is more important to Jesus than fasting.”

Jesus tells the parable of a Great Banquet in Luke 14:12-23.

**“Then Jesus said to his host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’**

**When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, ‘Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.’**

**Jesus replied: ‘A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’**

**But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’**

**Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’**

**Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’**

**The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’**

**‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’**

**Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.’**

God’s feasts are like Babette’s – surprising, unexpected and generous. Feasts where the physical and spiritual are united, where abundance and generosity are celebrated, where love is restored and forgiveness and peace are experienced. Where the humble and simple are honoured.

When we participate in communion we are celebrating a feast.

“When Jesus calls us to abundant life, he calls us to experience life as a feast, a feast of meanings, a feast of opportunities, and a feast of possibilities. To be invited to such a feast is to make Eucharist, to offer thanks for divine and diverse epiphanies of love that nurture toward well-being. Would that more of us could welcome his invitation.” (June Christine Goudey)

One reason we have a limited capacity to truly feast is that we don’t know how to fast. We always have so much that we become complacent about it. We take it for granted. Fasting can help us remember to be grateful for the plenty we enjoy.

Although Jesus and his disciples did not fast while he was with them he did assume that they would fast when he was no longer physically present. He teaches his disciples in Matthew 6:16, **“When you fast do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.”**

This teaching on fasting is done in the context of Jesus’ teaching on prayer and giving. For Jesus and for the early church the practices of prayer, giving and fasting were linked together.

Fasting is a discipline that has been practiced through the history of the church, it is a practice that has been misunderstood and misused but one that is still helpful and even necessary.

There are many reasons we may choose to fast but I want to focus on two this morning. We fast because it can help to free us from attachments and remind us that what we really hunger for is God and because it can help us to focus our thoughts, prayers and energy on doing good and acting justly.

Marjorie Thompson in the book, Soul Feast says, “In a more tangible, visceral way than any other spiritual discipline, fasting reveals our excessive attachments and the assumptions that lie behind them.... Fasting brings us face to face with how we put the material world ahead of its spiritual Source.”

When I fast from food and feel hungry I am reminded that I need to hunger for God. When I fast from coffee and get a headache I am reminded that God is the source of my life and I need to depend on Him. When I fast from television I am invited to spend my time resting, praying or doing something either productive or conducive to building relationships.

Fasting can help us to step outside of our habits in order to evaluate whether they are life giving or not.

The other dynamic of fasting that I want to talk about is the opportunity it gives us to share what we have with those who are in need. Just as Jesus' feasted to express solidarity with the poor and marginalized, we can fast to do so.

In the early church as well as in Scripture there was a strong tie between fasting and works of mercy. Augustine said, "Fasting both gives us time to pray and allows other people to eat instead of us. The voluntary privation of the rich becomes the necessary abundance of the poor."

God says through the prophet Isaiah,  
**"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" Is 58:6,7**

The kind of fasting that God has chosen is fasting that helps us to live more justly.

Perhaps we cannot all fast from all food; in fact there are many who should not fast from food; pregnant women, nursing mothers, children, the elderly, people with eating disorders and people with some medical conditions. Having said that we can all fast in some form. Partial fasts are a good way to begin.

Partial food fasts mean giving up some food but not all. The Eastern Church uses this form of fasting – they give up meat, fish, eggs,

dairy, olive oil and wine for Advent, Lent and two other fasting periods in the year.

Protestant and Catholic Lenten fasts often mean giving up a particular food for the season of Lent. Refraining from eating meat on Fridays has been a way the church has fasted in the past, and some continue to do so.

We can also fast (either partial or total) from things besides food – TV, shopping, Face book! Perhaps giving up some of these activities can give us time or money to "spend on behalf of the hungry". What you save by not eating meat one day a week, or giving up one meal a week can be given away. The money you would have spent on Latte's can be spent to provide the 'wanderer with shelter'.

"Fasting is cleansing. It cleans out our bodies. It lays bare our souls. It leads us into the arms of the One for whom we hunger. In the Divine Arms we become less demanding and more like the One who holds us. Then we experience new hungers. We hunger and thirst for justice, for goodness and holiness. We hunger for what is right. We hunger to be saints.

Most of us are not nearly hungry enough for the things that really matter." (Macrina Wiederkehr)

Fasting can help us refine our hunger.

Feasting moves out of fasting, fasting out of feasting – these two things are juxtaposed in our relationship with food, helping us to live mindfully of God's generous provision and of the reality that we need Him most of all. As we are nourished by God and the gifts He gives; we are also invited to nourish others by sharing what we have.

In our feasting and fasting, I believe the main points are to remind ourselves of the source of all we enjoy and then to be moved to generosity, even to the point of sacrifice, towards those who are in need.

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