



**Fasting as a discipline
A Lenten message from
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Greetings in the name of Christ. It is good to be with you on this journey of Lent. I am Keith Nelson, the district superintendent for the Sakakawea District. My earliest recollection of Lent and fasting is from when I was in the 5th or 6th grade and friends telling me they were giving up candy for Lent. When I'd ask them "why", "Why are you giving up candy / or anything at all during Lent, the usual answer was something like, because I'm supposed to, or because the "church" says I'm supposed to. And my response to that was simply, "Oh." This wasn't a concept or practice that I remember being talked about in our little country United Methodist where I grew up in South Dakota

So, here I am in this season of Lent taking a moment to talk to all of you about fasting – something that for me has become a meaningful spiritual discipline. Wesley, himself saw fasting as one of the 5 instituted means of Grace, something that Jesus himself practices. In his teaching, John Wesley seemed to be approaching fasting in 3 different ways, Total Abstinence, Partial Abstinence, and Specific Abstinence. Please understand those aren't terms Wesley used, those are mine, but he talked about fasting or abstinence in this manner

Total abstinence was just that Total Abstinence from any food, maybe liquids or broth could be ingested, but no food - none. Partial Abstinence, Wesley described as avoiding most foods, but for the sake of one's physical or health needs a person could partake of small amounts or certain foods. Specific Abstinence was seen as refraining from some specific food. Maybe something that the person found irresistible, or something that was a favorite, that for a period of time the person chooses not to include on one's personal menu, so to speak.

But Wesley also clarified that the point of fasting wasn't to simply avoid something, or keeping something out of your life. But rather the purpose of fasting was to help the person focus more attention on another specific area of spirituality. In other words, fasting isn't just about staying away from something; it is also about moving toward or seeking something else.

Years back in a church I was serving, I asked the question in one of my Sunday messages leading up to Lent, I asked the congregation, "What are you going to gain

this year during Lent. I remember people were a bit confused by that question because even in the United Methodist tradition, people usually talked about "giving something up" for Lent. But that particular year, I chose to flip it around by asking, "What do you hope to gain during Lent?" Which I believe is a question Wesley would appreciate. The focus for my church family was for them to have something in mind that they wanted to achieve or reach for through the process of giving something up, or through intentionally practicing a specific spiritual discipline during the season of Lent.

Now of course in our day, we realize fasting, or denying self, can have more expressions than simply avoiding food. Some people give up coffee, some people stop using Facebook or other forms of social media. I heard the other evening on the news that the game Candy Crush occupies the time of millions of people every day. Maybe there needs to be a letting go of playing Candy Crush or some other game on one's smart phone or other electronic device.

Or maybe another way to look at this is to ask the question, what is a time waster or simply a time filler in your life? What is it that is simply taking up time or space in your day that isn't particularly helpful or productive in your life or faith journey? Once you've identified that activity, then the next question is, is there a way to use that time and energy to focus on a spiritual priority in your life.

Wesley talked about using the time spent not eating, when one was fasting, to instead spend that time in prayer and connecting with God. Or, as Steve Harper puts it in the book "Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition", "Those who fast deny themselves so they can give priority to the things of the spirit."

So today I want to leave you with two questions. The first is, what will you give up for Lent? And keep in mind this is a very Wesleyan question because John Wesley believed in and regularly practiced fasting as a spiritual practice. The second question, and the more important one, is what will you seek to gain? Or what area of spirituality will you give focus or priority to in order to grow in your connection with God? I'd encourage you to answer those two questions, write out your answers, and then tell a friend – someone to pray for you during Lent and help hold you accountable to the goal you've set for this season.

May God richly bless you as together in this season of Lent we lay aside attention to our physical bodies or world in order that we might give greater attention to our Faith walk and with God.

