

“Loose the Bonds”: Fasting for Well-Being

Patricia Tull, A. B. Rhodes Professor Emerita of Old Testament, Louisville Presbyterian Seminary

In Isaiah 58, something—we aren’t told what—leads devout people to accuse God of inattention. They seem baffled by divine indifference to their piety: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (v. 3). In response, a prophet accuses them of insincerity. It’s not enough, he says, to look dejected in sackcloth and ashes. Rather, they must “loose the bonds of injustice.”

It all goes back to Egypt. After Moses freed the Hebrew slaves from the Pharaoh’s profitable but unjust slave economy, he reminded them not to forget their own past sufferings. Rather, they were to care for aliens, orphans, widows—that is, all who were economically vulnerable—because a society in which some are ill-treated, or go hungry, homeless, or ill-clothed, is not one in which freedom is being gratefully remembered.

So to the complaint that God is not listening to human prayers, the prophet essentially replies, “You are not listening to God’s prayers.” Where God reigns in human actions, no one is hungry, homeless, ill-clothed, or alone. Repentance, such as those fasting were trying to express, is indeed a journey inward for self-examination. But it is also a journey outward, adopting practices that mend the world.

What does this passage have to say to those of us who feast more often than we fast? The thread that binds us to these ancestors is the impulse to take shortcuts in seeking well-being, by denying that our fate is bound up with that of others.

Our ancestors failed to note that what they did as an occasional gesture of piety was what the poor did—or rather, suffered—every single day. They weren’t fasting from piety, but because they actually lacked food. They weren’t donning sackcloth by choice, but

because the alternative was going naked. They were enslaved to interlocking chains of injustice, chains to which their neighbors had confined them, whether through active unlawfulness or passive indifference. Our ancestors were wrong to deny the relationship between their well-being and that of their neighbors.

We too may forget, or deny, that our fate is bound up with that of others. Perhaps we fast (or, more likely, go on diets), or perhaps we feast, or perhaps we do both alternately.

Even with the most fastidious self-reliance, we cannot avoid the supply chain of unjust food from the fields of migrant labor. In this six-degrees-of-separation, interlinked-supply-chain, cargo-boat, multinational world, where we can’t even know how many people’s labor in how many countries supplied the parts for our car or computer, we are bound together. When our demand for electronics multiplies the destructive mining of precious

metals abroad, where toxic effluents poison vulnerable communities, we are bound up with them. There is no prayer or piety, neglect or denial, which severs that tie.

Ultimately, though, we are bound together because what happens to one happens to all. According to the apostle Paul, one part of the body cannot say to another, “I have no need of you.” Rather, “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Cor 12:21-22). The great injustice of climate change is that rich nations have created the carbon pollution, and poor nations, relatively innocent of this crime against scientific reality, suffer the effects. But even if the poor are harmed first and worst, we share one atmosphere surrounding one earth.

Many Christians, Jews, and others are calling for a worldwide fast in 2015 “to stand in solidarity with people living in poverty who are most affected by the impact of climate change” (<http://fastfortheclimate.org/en/>).

» READ: INHABITING EDEN

Patricia Tull’s book, *Inhabiting Eden* searches the wisdom of the Old Testament (OT) for ways of being in ideal relationship with God and creation.

Tull begins with a broad assessment of human relationship with God and creation—she finds that the relationship we have isn’t the ideal depicted in Scripture. After the broad overview, Tull assesses the implications of this less than ideal relationship in regards to commerce, food, animal life, and human rights. *Inhabiting Eden* ends with a hopeful prophetic call to renewed relationship with God and creation through living within the planet’s means.

Tull’s writing style and structure is accessible; she dives into current ecological issues and scriptural study with clear and concise language. Tull’s accessibility makes it tempting to read quickly, but the depth, poignancy, and relevance of the information often left me pausing to assess my own handling of these sacred texts in relation

to my everyday activity. There were even a few moments in *Inhabiting Eden* where I paused mid paragraph to google things like, “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” hoping that Tull’s description of our planet’s state was hyperbolic (it wasn’t. . . and ew).

Inhabiting Eden is an excellent read that reminds the reader of the timeless power of Scripture as it challenges the reader to see these old texts in a new light.

.....
Rev. Walter Canter, Calvary Presbyterian Church of Big Lick, Crosslick TN

