

HUNGER GAMES

I have never been a naturally gifted negotiator. Living in Armenia and having to negotiate the price of everything you see in the market helped increase my skills. Being a parent, however, has taken my negotiating skills to another level. Getting children to do things that are good for them but they don't want to do involves a complex series of negotiations. And though I wished I had learned this earlier, a key tactic in prevailing in negotiations is to keep something desirable 'in your back pocket' to use as leverage. If you do this thing you don't want to do (clean your room or practice piano), then you can do this thing you really want to do like (play roblox or watch paw patrol). Dangling these carrots usually works pretty well, but if we ever need extra motivation in our house to do the right thing, food is the greatest motivator-specifically desert. Keep those kids hungry and yearning for desert and you can get them to do anything, even eat their broccoli and peas!

Now, perhaps this isn't ideal parenting, but it is funny how high ideals of parenting can come crashing down to earth as parents fight for survival. And though you can of course overdo giving rewards to kids for good behavior, generally speaking, there is nothing wrong with tapping into kids' desires and appetites to move them forward into something better. In fact it seems that a similar harnessing of our desires to move into something better, is what is asked of us as we enter into the blessed forty day season of Great Lent after sundown today.

Lent is that season in the life of the church where we're invited to pay attention to our hunger, to those yearnings that we might use to move us toward what is better for us, our deepest hunger, which is for God. During Lent, we join Jesus in his forty days of disconcerting hunger in the wilderness. Jesus, we are told, is "led by the Spirit" to be "tempted by the devil." What kind of parent would allow their child to hunger and thirst, to be led into harm's way? A parent, perhaps, who believes in the highest potential of their children. A parent, like God the father, who knows that being too attached to the things of this world, prevents us from being attached to the greater things of God and his kingdom.

Well Jesus takes on the spiritual trial of Lent like an obedient son, he doesn't eat a crumb for weeks, and sets an example that echoes through the ages. Jesus is not inventing something new here; he is just perfecting a spiritual discipline found throughout the Bible; fasting is what God's people have always done when they are desperate to become more aware of God's presence. Fasting is how we use our body as a prayer. Isolated in the wild, Jesus fasts because he is a human with a body and needs to express his longing for the Father's nearness. He knows there is a spiritual capacity that only manifests when heart and body are joined in humility before God. Christian spirituality should never stay as an idea in the mind, but should move through the heart and be felt in the belly. (Winn Collier)

With stomach growling and strength fading, Jesus uses his gnawing hunger to place himself in a posture of attentiveness, to connect to his deepest craving and hunger for God. He doesn't hate life, he doesn't hate his body and he doesn't hate food. Jesus is simply disciplining the power of his appetites to lead him to something greater; to go beyond love of God's creation, to love of God Himself. Hungry for the greatest thing, Jesus overcomes every temptation to settle for lesser things. 'One does not live by bread alone,' Jesus rebukes the temptor, 'but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Mt 4:4

Tonight we begin Great Lent, and follow Jesus through his 40-day season of fasting. We surrender food and/or other attachments so that we might discover and recover the fundamental truth that we too crave God above all else. While Lent often involves withholding things we desire-like candy from our kids-we must remember the greater goal of our sacrifices. We are always fasting toward something greater; the great way, the great truth and great life of Easter Resurrection. We simplify. We cut things loose. We go silent. But all this so that we might grow closer to God. Like a good Father he is negotiating with us for our own good, for our eternal good.

Alexander Schmemmann, an Orthodox theologian who taught many of our senior priests, referred to fasting as holy therapy, and I think this is a great way to look forward to Lent. Where do our lives need healing in Christ? Where does the world need healing in Christ? What is preventing us from being our greatest self in God? In answering these questions, we don't give up some food or take on some spiritual practice merely to prove our spiritual fervor. We do it because we're physical people who, every so often, need to use our bodies to be renewed in God and thereby lead others to that renewal. May the hungers and desires that we experience during this great Lent remind us of our truest hunger, prodding us toward what our soul craves most; now and always and unto the ages of ages, amen.