

## **FASTING**

*by Rev. Elaine Poproski*

A couple weeks ago, a church I've long admired requested the resignation of one of their pastors for sexual misconduct, which seems a weak term for what actually transpired. This is a pastor I've long appreciated. As disappointed and gutted as I feel, I can't even begin to imagine how his church must be feeling.

At the beginning of February, a young pastor not far from here, who I knew when he was a teenager, was charged with multiple accounts of sexual assault. Those charges have not been proven in a court of law, but I expect they will stand up.

At the beginning of March, I learned of another pastor, who I have known from afar, who's credentials were suspended because of sexual misconduct. Again, the term seems inappropriately weak for what actually transpired. This pastor remains in complete denial about the inappropriateness of his behaviour and his own accountability for that behaviour.

Two years ago, it was revealed that Jean Vanier, the founder of a worldwide organization that supports adults with disabilities, had had on-going, coercive sexual relationships with six different women during his lifetime. I, like people all over the world, had looked up to this man as an exemplar of Christian living.

Last week we read the story about King David, from 2 Samuel 11 – 12, in which David saw a woman bathing on her rooftop one evening, inquired as to her identity, sent for her, and slept with her. Yet again, the term sexual misconduct seems too weak a word for King David's behaviour.

These stories make me angry. And they make me sad. Really sad. I'm sad for the women who were victimized. I'm sad for the churches and organizations these men led. I'm sad for the families of everyone involved. And I'm sad about the damage done to the reputation of Christ because these things were done by people who were supposed to represent Christ.

In all these stories, a person with power used that power to get something from someone who not only didn't have power in the relationship, but was also dependent in some way on the one who did have power, which meant saying 'no' was not an option. It makes me angry. And it makes me sad. And it makes me ashamed, because even though I have never sinned in the same way as those I just mentioned, power and its abuse comes in all sorts of forms. It's so important that we not just stand back and judge others, But that we look deep within ourselves.

A bunch of years ago, I was part of the leadership of a church with a busy nursery. A young mom with very little leadership experience had recently taken on the job of overseeing the nursery ministry. I loved that she'd taken it on. It was a sign of her growing belief that she had gifts and talents from God that could be used in a meaningful way. And for the first time in years the nursery was being treated like a valuable ministry, not just babysitting. I was honoured that this young mom allowed me to mentor her in her leadership role.

Another woman in the church was dissatisfied about a number of things related to the nursery. She talked to everyone except those responsible for the ministry. I found out all this was going on when the young mom overheard the other woman complaining one day. I was angry at this other woman. The young mom's newfound confidence was badly shaken, and she was deeply hurt that someone in her church would be talking about her like this.

So I made an appointment to visit the woman who'd been complaining, to confront her. What I didn't realize at the time, because I didn't take the time to listen, was that this woman had been told by someone else that no one was taking care of the nursery and she was talking about it to people because she was trying to figure out if she might be able to help. But I didn't know that because I walked into her home wrapped in all my imagined authority as a pastor, determined to hold this other woman to account for her toxic behaviour. To this day I am ashamed of how I hurt this other woman with all my assumptions, and my abuse of power.

I'm telling you that story because it's so easy for us to recognize the ways other people abuse their power, all the while being blind to the fact of our own power as well as our own abuse of that power.

In my case, I didn't know I was abusing my power, until a mentor pointed it out to me. I actually thought I was doing what my call as a leader required of me – this confrontation was my responsibility, that as a mentor of this young mom I was standing up for her – I was protecting her. Looking back, it's hard to imagine how I could possibly have thought hurting someone else, for any reason, was even a little bit in line with God's will. How could I have been so arrogant as to assume I knew what was true, even without investigating the matter? What made me think one person was more deserving of my support and encouragement than the other?

Sin is tricky. It's insidious. It's sneaky. It camouflages itself in good intentions and twists the truth just enough to make us believe in our own goodness, regardless of anyone else's experience. Power is one of sin's favourite tools, I think. It can be wielded as a weapon or masked behind false humility. In and of itself, power is neither good nor bad; it simply is. But when sin gets hold of it – when our pride, our selfishness, our ambition, grab onto it – people get hurt. Every time.

I am really thankful that our God is a God of mercy – a God who, when we turn to him, when we confess, when we repent... Our God forgives. I am so glad that the woman I confronted – the woman I hurt – was willing to accept my apology. (Though I have to be honest that our relationship was never quite the same after that. The trust was never quite restored.)

But there's something especially troubling about Jesus' followers abusing their power. There are examples of people who aren't Christians all over the world abusing their power. I would argue that Putin in Ukraine is a huge abuse of power. I would argue that the whole situation of a few years ago of our Prime Minister trying to force our Attorney General to rule in a certain way on a particular affair, such that she had to resign from her Cabinet post... That was an abuse of power. But somehow, there's something even more troubling when it's Jesus' followers who are abusing their power.

We who are Jesus' followers are no more immune to that sin than to any other, but somehow I find myself more disappointed, possibly even more angry and more saddened, when it's Jesus' followers perpetrating these abuses than when it's anyone else. I think it's because we're supposed to be better than that. We're supposed to have the Holy Spirit in us, guiding us, teaching us, convicting us, transforming us into Jesus' likeness. We're supposed to be becoming more and more like Jesus. But there's nothing less like Jesus than when we take whatever power we have and use it to hurt other people.

Listen again to the words from Philippians 2:

<sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross.

I know we've already spent some time with these verses this morning, but I don't think it's possible to over-emphasize the story being told.

Think about who Jesus was:

Jesus was the incarnation of God. He was the embodiment of the second person of the Trinity. He was God squished up into a human person. We sometimes refer to this second person of the Trinity as *the Word*. The opening of John's gospel is a great example of this. It reads this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

That Word – that second person of the Trinity – alongside the other two persons of the Trinity was all-powerful, eternal, omniscient... He was there before time, before the world was created. He always was and always will be. There is no power in heaven or on earth that can compete with him. He is "above all and in all and through all."<sup>i</sup>

In Colossians 1 we read of Jesus:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And yet, despite all of that, “he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”

The New King James Version puts it this way: He “made himself of no reputation...” There’s a footnote in that translation that suggests an alternate translation might read: He “emptied himself of his privileges.”

Think about that for a moment. He “emptied himself of his privileges.”

This Word of God, this image of the invisible God, this firstborn of all creation, this Word of God who was in the beginning with God, who was God, emptied himself of his privileges.

*Privilege* is a popular word these days. It’s a word that’s meant to capture all those ways we are advantaged over other people groups. There’s a lot of talk especially about white privilege. And while the topic makes some people uncomfortable and even angry, I really don’t see any way we can deny that white skin carries advantages in our world that coloured skin doesn’t. (It doesn’t mean that you haven’t worked for what you have – it doesn’t mean that you haven’t worked hard, but there are fewer barriers in your way – there are advantages to having white skin.) It’s not the only privilege. A post-secondary education carries advantages; Canadian citizenship carries advantages; stable employment in a job that pays a living wage carries advantages; the list goes on and on. In Covid we became very aware of the advantages afforded those of us who are able to work from home. And with those advantages comes power. We might not always think of it in those terms, but it’s true that with all of those advantages comes power, and with that power comes the danger of abusing our power.

Jesus “emptied himself of his privileges.” Though he was in the form of God [He had all the privileges – all the advantages – all the power of being God], he “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

I think there’s something really important in this whole emptying thing. When Paul writes that we are to have the same mind in us as Christ Jesus, I think he means we are, like Jesus, to empty ourselves of all our privileges. We are to set aside our power in favour of obedience. Imagine how all those stories I told when I began this sermon might have ended differently had those leaders emptied themselves of their privileges – set aside their power – rather than exploit it (knowingly or unknowingly).

I need to clarify one thing. Even though Jesus “emptied himself”, he was not suddenly powerless. That’s one of the great mysteries of the incarnation. While Jesus was fully human, he was also fully divine. At any time, he could have chosen and wielded the power and privilege of God to make everyone do whatever he wanted. We’re told that after Jesus was baptized, he went into the desert where the devil tempted him. One of the great temptations the devil laid before him, was when he said, “Look at the world spread out before you. I will make you king of the world.” This was the temptation: to take back that power, to wield that power of the fully divine that he was, to make everybody do whatever it was that he wanted, to be the dictator (maybe a benevolent dictator, but a dictator nonetheless). But instead, Jesus turned down that temptation.

He emptied himself of his privileges. He chose to take the form of a slave – a servant – one who would live to love and serve others and to be at their mercy.

We cannot empty ourselves of our privileges. I cannot get rid of the privileges I have because of my white skin, for instance. Those privileges simply are. But I can, and I must, turn those privileges over to God. In verse 8 of Philippians 2 Paul writes of Jesus' obedience. I think this is what the emptying is really about. It's about intentionally choosing not to use our privileges or our power except in obedience to God – obedience that is always about sacrifice and service. Obedience that even puts us at risk of being hurt, of being broken, of being crucified ourselves.

This is where the Spiritual Discipline of fasting comes in.

I've been thinking a lot about fasting the past few weeks. I've been wrestling with the question of why we should fast. What is it about fasting that puts us in a position to know God? (Remember, the Spiritual Disciplines are tools that we use to put us in a position where we will know God – to put us into a posture for knowing God.) This is where I've landed on the question so far:

When we fast – when we remove something important from our lives for a time – we are weakened, we are made vulnerable, and thus we are newly aware of our dependence on God. Traditionally, fasting is about food. And as such when we fast we are quite literally, physically weakened. But I contend that fasting can include anything important in our lives – anything that contributes to our strength and self-sufficiency. Anything that, when we give it up, makes us weak or vulnerable in some way.

I know that over the last number of years the idea of connecting fasting with Lent (those weeks leading up to Easter) has become very popular, even in circles like our Baptist circles where years ago it was unheard of. But I also know that a lot of times, when we're talking about fasting, we're not giving up the things that make us weak, we're not giving up the things, the giving up of which makes us dependent on God. They might be hard things to give up. Maybe we say: "for these six weeks I'm giving up chocolate," or "for these six weeks, I'm not going to watch television," or "for these six weeks I'm going to... [fill in the blank]." But I think the point of fasting is not the: "Hey, look at me, I gave something up that was hard for me to give up." The point of fasting is that it puts us into a place of dependence on God, either because we are physically weakened because of the fasting from food, or because we are emotionally or mentally weakened because we begin to realize that we have depended on other things to keep us strong, to keep us self-sufficient; we have turned to other things than God to answer our own hurts, our own needs, and our own lives.

Fasting is about choosing to be humbled before God. Because when we are humbled before God, when we are weakened before God, when we recognize our dependence on God, we discover God's extraordinary love and faithfulness. When we are strong and self-sufficient, we don't need God like we do when we are weak and vulnerable. How many times have we called out to God for help when everything is going well? How many times have we even remembered to talk to God when everything is going great? It's when everything falls apart that we call out to God. It's when people we love are hurting or are sick that we cry out to God for help. We always need

God, but it's really easy to forget that we need God. Even if we say we need God, a lot of times we aren't actually living like we need God. We Christians, especially if we've grown up in the church, are really good at saying all the right words. We say, "Yes, we need to be humble; Yes, I am dependant on God; Isn't it great that God is faithful?" But in the way that we actually live our lives, are we living in such a way that shows that we are dependant on God – that shows that we need his grace and forgiveness, his love, his faithfulness. Or are we living in such a way that we can mostly just take care of ourselves, and only in extraordinary circumstances do we need him?

When we fast, we are intentionally putting ourselves in that place where we are weak – where we are dependant on God.

I don't think it's possible to abuse our power when we are kneeling before God in acknowledgement of our absolute dependence on God. I don't think it's possible to use our privileges to hurt others when we are kneeling before God this way. When we practice the Spiritual Discipline of fasting this posture of kneeling before God becomes more and more the norm. It's not that fasting is some magic thing that suddenly makes us more humble. Any of the Spiritual Disciplines can be practiced and not do anything about our spiritual lives. Fasting is really popular in the diet and weight management community. We talk about the benefits to our health of intermittent fasting. We're not talking about fasting just so we can lose weight or maintain a healthy body weight. We're talking about fasting as a recognition of our need for God, of our dependence on God. We are putting ourselves in a posture of kneeling before God.

When I confronted the complaining woman I told you about earlier in my story of the nursery ministry, I did so with full confidence that I was doing the right thing. I used my privilege as her pastor, my training as a leader – as someone she recognized as an authority – to be heard. I remember the feeling of assurance I carried into that room. I remember being convinced that I was behaving as a strong leader should. If only I'd spent more time on my knees before God, humbled and aware of my own weakness and dependence on God. Perhaps I would not have caused her pain. Perhaps I would not have damaged our relationship. Perhaps, if I was practicing the Spiritual Discipline of fasting in my life, I would not have had a story to share this morning.

This week I hope you will take some time to honestly consider how you are positioned before God. Is there anything important in your life right now that God is inviting you to give up – to fast from? How dependent are you on God in the way you live your life? Take some time to look past the words you speak and examine the way you actually live. Does your life reflect your dependence on God or are you mostly living a self-sufficient life in your own strength?

This week, I hope that you will take some time to honestly consider how you are positioned before God. (Not just the way you like to think you're positioned before God, but what does the way you are living say about how you are positioned before God.) Is there anything important in your life right now, anything that you need to be giving up, that you need to be letting go of, that you need to be fasting from? How dependent are you on God in the way that you live your life?

I invite you this week to take some time to look past the words you speak, to examine the way that you actually live. Does your life reflect your dependence on God, or are you mostly living a self-sufficient life in your own strength?

As you engage in this self-examination... I know that this self-examination is not easy; it can be really painful; it can bring up deep feelings of shame. But here's the thing, when Jesus died on the cross, he didn't just take the guilt, the sin, the things that we did, but he took our very shame on that cross with him.

As you engage in this self examination, you may become aware of ways you have abused your power. You may become aware of ways you have used your privileges for your own benefit, rather than in obedience and submission to God. If so, take it as an invitation to confess, to repent, to do whatever you can to repair any damage you have caused, and to experience the incredible forgiveness of God. Take it as an invitation to return to your knees in humble dependence on God who is love, who we know because he became one of us and because he continues to live in us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>i</sup> Ephesians 4:6