

## Whole40

Lent 1: Our Bodies

*Fasting from alcohol, soda, snacks, sweets. Feasting on water, mindful eating, rest.*

February 11, 2024

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

John 10:10b

*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Isaiah 55:2

*Why spend money on what is not bread,  
and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and you will delight in the richest of fare.*

I grew up in the days when Presbyterians were re-discovering Lent. The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of liturgical renewal. Church people were realizing how important ritual can be to faith--and here was this ancient Catholic practice that drew attention to the body and its appetites. When I first learned about Lent, it was all about *renunciation*. It was about giving things up for 40 days. I did various kinds of Lenten fasts in my 20s to feel the ache in my stomach--the hunger was supposed to remind me of my hunger for God who satisfies every need.

The idea of Lent was to make life uncomfortable. This vision of Lenten practice is valuable. For one, if we go hungry, or go without something important by choice, that can bring us into a solidarity with our neighbors who are hungry by necessity. Lent can be a season for Christians to be united with all who are suffering. I think of the people of Gaza, our neighbors who come to the fridge. Lent as a time of renunciation can connect us to Jesus' own experience in the wilderness, when he was hungry and alone for 40 days. At the end of that time, Jesus was confronted with three temptations. But his deprivation somehow gave him a spiritual strength and clarity of mind. Our fasting and renunciations can bring us into that same kind of space with Jesus.

The idea that Lent is only a time of renunciation is so deep, it took me a little while to understand the genius of the Lenten Whole40 curriculum that we're beginning today. The ancient tradition of fasting is in this curriculum, for sure. This week you are all invited to up things that you unconsciously put into your body: sweets, sugar, salt, alcohol, fast food, soft drinks. You are asked to stop. Each week of Lent, you will be invited to give up something different: mindless screen time, frivolous spending.

But Whole40 is only partly about fasting. It's also about *feasting*. You're not just "giving up" something. You are also invited to replace the thing you've given up with something else--and "feast" on that something else. You feast on things that are good, as you fast on things that do not nourish.

We know from observing our own behavior and that of others that trying to stop doing something can be hard. Habits--especially deep, unconscious habits, are very hard to

change. Change happens when we subtract the things that don't help and replace them with things that do help. Our bodies--and our minds--want to feast. Is it possible that we are made by God to feast? Perhaps. But we may have learn how to feast *well*.

The Whole40 Lenten experience is about connecting the desires of our bodies to the God who made these bodies; it is a way for us to learn how to both fast and feast well.

What does this mean? First, let's say what it doesn't mean. Lent is not a self-improvement plan. This not a diet. This not an effort to make ourselves better each day. This not perfectionism posing as spiritual practice.

This Lenten practice is also not about portraying our desires as "sinful." We're not doing these things to point out how powerless you are against your appetites. We all know that our bodily appetites are powerful. We don't do the things we know we should do; we do things that we know we shouldn't do; most of the time, we honestly can't say why, nor can we stop. Sin--which is a way of living that harms ourselves and others--is real. And sometimes, our appetites are pathways for sin to flow into our lives.

But what I want you to reject is any notion that our appetites are hopelessly disordered. Your body is not sinful or shameful. Although our bodily desires can be sinful, I don't want you thinking that your body can't be trusted. I certainly don't want anyone to get the idea that bodily pleasure is dangerous. That's a theological lie.

Human beings are created good, including our bodies. Our bodies are gifts given by God. God surrounds us with a garden of delights. One of the great joys of life is pleasure for the body.

If that's true, then the point of any practice like the ones we are taking up this Lent can't just be renouncing pleasure. The goal is *re-training our delight*. Let's explore what it looks like to hunger for--and delight in--the things that God gives us that are good. Let us renounce the things that don't bring fullness of life.

Here's an image I want to try out with you: what if each one of us were invited in Lent to pull out all of our desires? What if we could lay them on a table for everyone to look at?

It would be completely embarrassing. The first thing people think about is our desire for physical intimacy. And yes, those particular desires could be embarrassing for some of us. But maybe not the most embarrassing thing you desire. Think about all of the things your body desires. My sugar addiction is crazy--I sneak into the bag of chocolate chips and pop them at all hours of the day. Some of you cannot get through a night without a drink of alcohol. Some of you eat because you have no other way to calm your anxiety. Some of you work all the time to the detriment of your family because your ego hungers for the affirmation that work provides.

It could be embarrassing if we had to pull out all of the things we desire and put them on the table. It would show our private frailties. They would reveal the ways that every one of us tries feed ourselves with things that “do not satisfy.”

Now try imagining something else: imagine a community that is safe enough for you to share these things about yourself because you know in that community you are completely loved and accepted--disordered desires and all. What if you knew you belonged to a community that wanted to walk with you without judgment as you re-order your desire? Maybe that community right now is just one other person. Maybe that's the one person that you want to share this Lenten journey with. Or maybe there's a small group of you that can do this together. Maybe within your family.

Lenten Whole40 is about walking with each another as God's Spirit re-orders our desires. There's a wonderful book that shapes the way I have come to think about all of this by James Smith, called “Desiring the Kingdom.” Smith says that we ought to think about all of life as a process of formation in *what* and *how* to love. He writes:

“Being a disciple of Jesus is not a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it's a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly--who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love.

There are many cultural forces that are working to shape what you love. Capitalism is working every day to shape what you love. Political parties are working to shape what you love. Sports teams are working to shape what you love. People on social media are working to shape what you love. Have you been convinced to love things that are not worth loving?

Use this season to examine your own desires. Put them out on the proverbial table. Do things that help re-shape your desire: worship, prayer, serving, others.

The Christian life *is* a life of bodily delight. Our bodies are capable of hungering for what is good. And what is good?

- Love is good for the body.
- Daily bread is good for the body.
- Trusting relationships are good for the body.
- The earth is good for the body.
- Kindness and laughter are good for the body.
- Generosity is good for the body; living for the sake of others is good for everybody

Let this season of Lent not be just a season of renunciation. Let it be a season for delight. Let's put our desires on the table; laugh; and re-learn together how to delight in God's love as it blossoms--in us and around us--into fullness of life.