

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Fasting from Apathy

Scripture: John 3:11-21

February 21st, 2021

Fasting from Apathy: For God so Loved the World

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Our yearly theme is Discipleship, and the focus of Lent is repentance in order to become a better disciple of Jesus Christ. The book we will be using to guide these reflections will be the book by George Hovaness Donigan, *A World Worth Saving*, and I will refer to him as Rev. George to escape the agony of mispronouncing his name every time I try and say it. The focus of this book is to look at Lent with a pair of fresh eyes and a new perspective to challenge us from doing things the way we have always done them. Instead of giving up practices as we traditionally do, and I am sure many of you, like myself, have pledged to do, Rev. George flips this tradition on its head by asking us what practices you can build in your life instead of taking away to make this time of Lent more wholesome. I think they go hand-in-hand, but I hope you do not view this as a selfish endeavor, because it is not. Think of this concept as being rooted in the Greatest Commandment in the sense that you cannot love another until you learn to love yourself. You cannot serve others until you understand what serving others looks like.

What I like about this book is Rev. George asks great questions. He starts by asking, "How do we connect public worship with what happens Tuesday afternoon at work or Thursday night at the retail outlet?" and he asks, "How do we love God and love our neighbor?" (Hovaness Donigan p 9). Questions are important because they lead to better questions and invite us to live in the tension and realness of our lives, because we are constantly asking questions throughout our world and our history. I believe asking questions is fundamental to our faith. So, I have a great question that was always posed by one of the professors at Iliff, Dr. Vincent Harding, "Who was your mother's mother?"

My mother's mother was Lois Suzanne Thompson who was born in Galveston, Texas. She was born into the wealthy family of the Candler's,

who had recently sold their family company, Coca-Cola, to the highest bidder, and were looking for a more simple, less public life as my great-great-great grandfather was known by so many for being mayor of Atlanta, the founder of Coca-Cola, and the leading contributor to Candler School of Theology. Even though my family lost a significant portion of their earnings in the Great Depression, my grandmother still had more than most during her early life. She grew up without a need to worry about money because someone in the family would always lend a helping hand. My grandmother was a learner and wanted to see the world. Now, at the time, it was unheard of for women to attend college, but nonetheless, this did not stop her from pursuing her dreams as she attended university at Women's college in New York to study theater.

Although she never became a famous actor, or use her degree to go into any profession, she still has a love for movies, acting, and plays. We, her family, can see her love and passion for drama because Grammy might seem like the docile, sweet old lady, but she will put all 5'3 140 lbs with a smack from her wooden spoon if you don't mind or listen to what she is saying. Instead of pursuing a career in theater, she met my grandfather, the son of a Sears salesman from Champagne, Illinois who was serving in the United States Coast Guard in South Carolina where they met on a family trip. After staying in touch, they decided to marry and moved to Largo, Florida.

My mother, Susan Leuck Garman, Leuck being her maiden name, was born in Largo, Florida of Pinellas County. The focal point of today's story of my mother's is a decision she faced when we lived in Virginia. My father had taken a job at Capital One in the Richmond headquarters and my mother, sisters, and I had all moved to Glen Allen, VA. This is when my father's alcoholism became painfully apparent through his verbal and emotional abuse, and my mother faced the hardest decision in her life. Would she stay with my father and remain in her apathy to just put up with him, or would she choose to live her life free from his abuse and hatred? She choose life instead of apathy. Without a job or work experience in over a decade, without a paycheck or even a bank account in her name, without a college degree or any possession of much value, my mother looked her apathy in the eye and said, not me! She knew this is what she had to do to protect herself, and most importantly, this is what she had to do to protect her children.

My mother went to school and received her Master's degree in education, she worked multiple jobs, any job to put food on our table, she

worked in jobs that took care of foster children, she educated children, and made children feel like they were something in this world, and she choose to be independent and self-sufficient free from anyone who would ever control her life. She chose action over apathy. She did this because of her devout faith and attentiveness to her Christian values. Let us look together and read one of the most foundational Christian scriptures of the Christian faith. This is John 3:11-21.

11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. **17** "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. **20** For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. **21** But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (NRSV).

Rev. George poses a great question by saying, "Why do you think God has constantly acted and continues to act on behalf of Creation and humanity? (Hovaness-Donigian p 18). This verse sums it up and in verse 17, although I am sure most of could quote verse 16, which undoubtedly still important. **17** "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (NRSV). God has always been concerned with the world as we read today in our lectionary scriptures. God made the rainbow as a promise to not destroy humanity again after the Great Flood, David reminds us through Psalm 25 that God's salvation is never impossible, even in our most troubling times, and the Gospel of Mark reminds us our God saw his son, saw he was good, and blessed him through his baptism to spread the good news to all the oppressed peoples of the Earth.

In a *World Worth Saving*, fasting is the focal point of the first chapter as this is a common practice in Lent. Most of the time we choose more trivial things to fast from such as not drinking coffee or soda, refraining from eating sweets or carbs, but Rev. George tells us we must choose to fill this void with something else instead of simply quitting something. He says, "I view fasting as a way to let go of our earthly cares for a time and to stand empty before God. I think of fasting as a way to imitate Jesus Christ in the wilderness" (Hovaness Donigian p 22). These are not only the practices in which Rev. George wants us to see, but these are ways to live out scripture in our lives of what fasting has always been. When Jesus portrays this emptiness as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his death on Calvary, when Jesus prays this "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39). In our lectionary text for Ash Wednesday, Jesus reminds us in the Sermon of the Mount we are not to fast in order to show others how faithful we are to our Creator, but we fast because God calls us to empty ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit! (Matthew 6:17–18). Even the early church took part in the tradition of fasting when Barnabas and Saul are sent out to their mission to Cyprus, as the members of the church of Antioch fasted with them and prayed over them before their commissioning. Rev. George points out, "Christ calls for more than this action of giving up a food that we may or may not like. Our consideration for fasting will take us on a course of action that will make a difference during the season of Lent and well beyond Easter" (Hovaness Donigian p 22). If we are to call ourselves an Easter people, a people who are reborn every Easter season, then we must be moved to action, not guided, and suppressed by our apathy.

But how in the world do we do this? Because I certainly have what many are beginning to call *Covid Fatigue*. Not a physical symptom of the virus, but a spiritual, emotional, and psychological fatigue, which plagues the soul and leads us to apathy. Covid fatigue is dangerous because it is causing so many of us, myself included, to live in a place of fear and not hope. It is causing many young people to question their futures and question the world around them, and likewise, it is forcing many elder folks to be confined to their homes only to become isolated and lonely because they are some of the most vulnerable to the disease. It has woke the world up to some of our current conditions as we have nothing to do but scroll through our news feed on social media questioning if an end will ever come. Not only do we have the disease to contend with, but why would we not have Covid fatigue due to the response from our leaders?

Some leaders are saying don't need to wear masks because they want to open the economy up to line my pockets with more money. Billionaires are making even more money off their investments and hedge funds as children and elderly folks starve and veterans live in our streets. Senators flee to Cancun as their constituent's face power outages. Why wouldn't we have Covid fatigue and a general apathy for the world we currently live in? Because Christ calls us to take up our cross and move the world into action, not apathy; hope, not fear; peace, not war; love, not hatred.

Dear Church, we have an opportunity a moment to be seized. A moment in time in which we can wait passively on the sidelines and hope for the best, or we can choose to be the people God called us to be and rise up as the Easter people and serve those around us. We may not defeat political corruption or big money politics, we may not unite a country so divided by social and economic factors which are out of our control, and we may not be able to save every starving child or save every isolated elder of our town, but our God calls us to at least try and spread the good news throughout the world, because, ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

I leave you today with two final points. Firstly, the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when in his sermon, *A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart*, he says this, "God is neither hardhearted nor softminded. He is tough minded enough to transcend the world; he is tenderhearted enough to live in it. He does not leave us alone in our agonies and struggles. He seeks us in dark places and suffers with us and for us in our tragic prodigality" (*Strength to Love*. King Jr. p. 9). Secondly, the words from an anonymous composer from an old Appalachian hymn, *What Wondrous Love is This*, "To God and to the Lamb I will sing, I will sing, to God and to the Lamb, I will sing; to God and to the Lamb who is the great I AM, while millions join the theme I will sing, I will sing; while millions join the theme, I will sing" (UMH 292). Millions will not sing in the songs of justice and compassion if the church refuses to listen to them or excludes them from God's open doors filled with love, mercy, and grace. May we find the courage to do what is necessary, even in the face of death itself. Amen.