

A few months before my father died I talked with him about eating – because he was not doing it. His cancer was advancing. He was losing his strength. His treatments were less effective. Our family was concerned about a lot of things, but this one especially puzzled me. Why wasn't he eating? He said, "It's just not that easy." I asked, "Do you not want to eat? Or is it that you physically can't eat?" Those two questions seemed very different to me, but they didn't to him. He really couldn't answer. He just couldn't eat.

Even when we are in the best of health, at times we cannot eat. If you've been in conflict, and you have to say something to someone, you may feel your stomach tighten. It may be meal time, but you're not hungry. Or if some exciting event is going to happen – you're going to see someone you love after a very long absence, or you are waiting for news about a job, or it's your wedding day – you may not be able to eat. Sometimes your doctor will ask you to fast before you take some tests or undergo some surgery. If you're worried enough about the procedure that awaits you, you won't feel like eating anyway. At times we naturally fast because our body responds to certain emotional situations.

Lent is a time of fasting because of an emotional situation. We realize that in the past year we have drifted apart from the one relationship that means the most to us, our relationship with God. We have chosen to do other things rather than spend time with him; we have said things that displeased him; we have treated other people in ways that angered him. We know this, and we can feel this, right in the pit of our stomach, the same place we feel hunger. Whenever we experience a natural fast, it's because we hunger for something more than food. We hunger for love, for respectability, for forgiveness.

Joel lived when a plague of locusts attacked Israel. The people believed God was angry because they had sinned. So Joel prescribed a remedy for them: fast. He called for other things: weeping, mourning, and gathering of the entire people; newlyweds even left the bedroom behind because something else was more important – their relationship with God.

The Catholic Church used to ask its members to fast every day during Lent, but today we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. It is recommended that we fast again on Holy Saturday. The fast applies to people from age 18 to their 59th birthday, but others may join it; it means eating only one full meal on that day. The other meals should not equal a second meal; we do not snack. We abstain from meat on all the Fridays of Lent, but we fast only on two or three days. So, one thing to consider as we step into Lent, is to make this a season when we eat less food; not just reduce the options of which foods we eat, but eating less altogether. The hunger we feel will be a hunger for something more, a hunger for friendship with God. It will make the most sense if you are seeking some particular forgiveness, some change in behavior you need to make. Then you will want to fast. You will not be able to distinguish between these two questions: "Do you not want to eat? Or is it that you physically can't eat?" The hunger you feel will be a hunger for God.