I realize that when you see my sermon title you probably think of Chick-fil-A. But Chick-fil-A is closed on Sundays so today is about another genre of fast food. God's fast food. This isn't about consuming communion elements or a Methodist hymnal or the Book of Common Prayer. This isn't a medical study of our physical eating habits and the amount of pounds we gain or lose by eating this fast food. We won't be examining our stomachs but our hearts. God's fast food leads us to interrogate our worship diet. Many of us have probably been on a diet, are on a diet, or someone we know thinks we ought to be on a diet. We think diets make us feel good, but most of all, look good. There are so many diets available these days, making all kinds of promises. But the worship diet is not about looks; it's about love—the love of God and love of neighbor. In many religious traditions, including Christianity, there is the spiritual practice of fasting, a fast diet, a worship diet, where one abstains from food in order to improve one’s own spiritual life before God.

Israel engages in this type of fast. They abstain from food and wear the GQ sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning and penance. They are liturgically literate and ritually right. They want to draw closer to God and this is the way they know how to do it from their catechism classes in Sunday school. This is how they’ve done worship for years. Sing the right song, say the right prayer, do the right dance, say ‘amen’ at the right time. But, they seem to move farther away from God as they dive deeper into themselves, deeper into their own worship pattern. They can’t figure out why their fasting won’t work. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” “I have a full worship diet of Christianity in my life. I go to Duke Chapel. I sing beautiful hymns, and say lovely prayers of confession, and serve the communion elements from time to time, and pay my tithes, and attend worship committee meetings where we talk about the last committee meeting where we talked about the last committee meeting. I help with fellowship meals whenever we have them. I pray before my meals at home and even before I go to bed. I read my Bible every day, early in the morning of course, and sometimes I even fast like Israel, but God, where are you?”

Israel can’t figure out what’s wrong with their worship diet until God speaks – “you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with your fists. Is this the fast I choose, a day to humble oneself? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?” God brings a serious liturgical critique against Israel. Israel’s fast diet is an abstention, not just from food, but from others. They delight in God but despise God’s people. They abstain from loving their neighbor and feed on a worship diet of selfish, individualistic living which regards no one else but themselves. Somehow their ritual ethic becomes disconnected from a righteous ethic. Their fasting leads them quickly away toward ethical negligence because religious ritual without a social outlook can become only self-serving. Israel reveals how tempting it is to believe that performing holy acts like fasting or proximity to holy things like a church or a Bible or the sacraments, make us holy; it’s idolatry when we make our liturgical or spiritual practices or objects little idols, because it’s really a turn to ourselves bowing at our own altar, rather than turning to God which is also a turn outward toward others in need.
What Israel has done is create God in their own image and remix the traditional hymn and sing, “Crown Me with Many Crowns.” They neglect serving others, mistreat and bully them with violent acts. Their spiritual liturgical diet is navel-gazing at their stomachs full of self at the throne of narcissism. They serve their own interests, while disregarding others. They're satisfied with a status quo Christian spirituality that has no impact on society when the gospel is personal, communal, and social. They are only concerned with the liturgy and not the liturgy after the liturgy. And so, they beat and tear down anyone and anything on their way up towards the pearly gates of heaven. “I’ll fly away Oh glory, I’ll fly away, when I die Hallelujah bye and bye” as they wave bye-bye to their neighbor in need.

But is this just Israel’s story or is it ours, too? Has Israel’s liturgical approach been our practical theology of worship all along? I mean one in which we think that just coming to a Sunday service or a Wednesday night prayer meeting or attending a Bible study or a Christian Education class is the totality of what it means to worship God, and if we don’t like the preaching, the singing, the praying, the liturgy, the choir robes, the way communion is administered, we can go somewhere else, window shopping for a church that we like because it suits our interests, shopping at what Yale professor Bryan Spinks calls the “worship mall.” In this consumeristic age, we may struggle with selfishness and desire only “self-maximization” (Christian Scharen). Might it be that our worship diet neglects others often and we possess an anorexic theology of worship thin on God’s love for the world? It may look like worship and sound like worship and feel like worship but if concrete love of neighbor is not included as part of our regular diet of worship, it isn’t worship! Why do we fast, worship, and you do not see? Maybe our worship only reflects and reinforces our own interests and not God’s interest in giving oneself for the sake of the world.

Immortal, invisible, I’m only wise? If that is the case, we’re on the wrong kind of worship diet, a destructive diet that distances ourselves from others when in fact our Sunday worship of God is only authenticated by how we live for God Monday through Saturday in the world. If we gaze out at our world today, instead of Dr. King’s dream of a beloved community, holding hands and singing, we seem to be living a nightmare with a disturbing breach, not “coming together,” not realizing our lives are interdependent, but seeing, in the words of the Nigerian novel, “things fall apart.” They are falling apart because we may be serving our own interests even when it comes to worship. We get liturgical fast food only for ourselves in the drive thru of oppressive selfishness. And as we look at the menu, we experience theological amnesia, and forget that someone else is hungry, homeless and naked, entering “the darkness of destructive selfishness” (Dr. King). “Why do we fast, but you do not see?”

God sees clearly actually but God’s worship diet includes a different kind of fast food. “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” God redefines what fasting is by moving beyond the practice itself to including the freedom of and provision for other people. God calls for worship, fasting, as selfless giving. God calls for worship as service in the world. God tells Israel, “Your fasting is about abstention, even abstaining from doing justice, but my worship is about participation, engagement, doing justice for others, walking in love towards another. My worship is having your life service match your lip service. My worship includes social witness and social justice. My worship diet incorporates your entire life. My worship diet plan will help the world that I love.” God reframes fasting, therefore worship, as a way of life, not a particular day or a singular practice. God-centered worship will lead
to “opposition to injustice, liberation from oppressive systems, the sharing of resources, and the growth of community” (Roger van Harn). Loving God means loving one’s neighbors (Matt 22:37-40).

With this understanding, fasting, worship, is service, so we might be in a worship service right now but when you leave, there’s another worship service, there’s another liturgy after the liturgy, where we engage in worship by doing the mission of God in the world. If our service here becomes severed from our service out there, then we lose liturgical integrity because our creeds don’t match our deeds and we make hypocrisy holy. It is not worship and ethics, but God’s fast food challenges us to see worship as ethics. Fasting is action. Worship is a verb. If there is any abstention in this form of fasting, it is the abstaining from indifference and inactivity and egotism because right worship is righteous living committed to others, especially the least of these. This worship diet is for the common good. Dr. King was on this diet and said, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?” That is the question of the hour as we check ourselves before we wreck ourselves liturgically. What are you doing for others?

And God didn’t say that they had to be Christian in order to be helped. God didn’t say that they had to have the same skin color or same language to be helped. God didn’t say that they had to believe the same thing you believe or like the same things you like to be helped. Need is no respecter of persons! God just said that the food for the fast diet is to loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, give bread to the hungry, a home to the homeless, clothes to the naked, and love to somebody.

And the good news is that God is right there, inhabiting our worship as we serve. After God redefines fasting and gives the challenge, the prophet declares, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly…Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.” God actually is found among the oppressed. “Here I am. Right with the least of these. Right with the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the outcast. Right with that person you don’t want to touch and rather ignore. Right on the margins. That’s where you’ll find me if you eat my fast food. Here I am, conducting the liturgy of liberation. Here I am. I’m Immanuel. Here I am. You won’t be alone in your service. Here I am, putting in the proper ingredients in your worship diet of love and justice. Here I am, still making my fast food for the poor and widows. Here I am with the least, the last, the left out. Here I am in the trenches of trouble but this shouldn’t surprise you.”

Our King is calling from the hungry furrows 
Whilst we are cruising through the aisles of plenty, 
Our hoardings screen us from the man of sorrows, 
Our soundtracks drown his murmur: ‘I am thirsty’. 
He stands in line to sign in as a stranger 
And seek a welcome from the world he made, 
We see him only as a threat, a danger, 
He asks for clothes, we strip-search him instead. 
And if he should fall sick then we take care 
That he does not infect our private health, 
We lock him in the prisons of our fear 
Lest he unlock the prison of our wealth. 
But still on Sunday we shall stand and sing
The praises of our hidden Lord and King. (Malcolm Guite)

“Here I am.” “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me . . . just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25). “This is where you will find me. Here I am – you thought you were serving me, but I am serving you. I am meeting your need. I am rebuilding your ruined society through your service. Your light shall break forth like the dawn. Your healing shall spring up quickly. Your light shall rise in the darkness. Your gloom will be like the noonday. Your bones will be made strong. You shall be like a watered garden. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. That can’t happen without me. That can’t happen without my fast. You’ll call and cry for help and I’ll answer. Here I am.”

Among just, reordered relationships, recognizing that our healing is linked with the healing of others, God is present and glory shines. That light shines as the breach of brokenness in a society is bridged and healed. Where there is reconciliation, God is and God’s light shines. This is God’s promise to us. That when we work to repair the breach between us and our neighbors by repairing the divide between our worship practices and mission in the world, God is present, restoring what was damaged and ravaged to create an eternal communal harmony. Our society and its streets will be full of peace and the light of this world will be no other than the glory of the Lord (Isaiah 60:1-2).

“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise…” because your life will be the ‘amen’ to the proclamation on your lips and you can then stand and sing on Sundays the praises of our hidden Lord and worship with integrity.

Natalia Dmitruk exemplified great integrity in 2004 in the Ukraine when Victor Yushchenko stood for the presidency there. He was opposed by the ruling party, had his face disfigured and was mysteriously poisoned. Yet this could not deter him from running for the presidency. On the day of the election, Yushchenko had a comfortable lead but the ruling party would not have any of that and tampered with the results. The state-run television station reported, “Ladies and gentlemen, we announce that the challenger Victor Yushchenko has been decisively defeated.” In the lower right-hand corner of that same TV screen shot, Natalia Dmitruk was translating for the deaf community and as the news presenter reported the lies of the regime, Dmitruk refused to translate them. Rather, she signed, “I’m addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine...They are lying and I’m ashamed to translate those lies. Yushchenko is our president.” This led the deaf community to spread this message via text about the fabrications and as the news spread about Dmitruk’s act of courage and truth, other journalists were inspired to do the same and tell the truth. Eventually, the “Orange Revolution” occurred in which a million people wore orange and went to the capital city of Kiev to call for a new election. When a new election was held, Victor Yushchenko became president.

One small act of integrity in the corner of a big TV screen can make a world of difference and make the world different (adapted from Philip Yancey). Be the word you proclaim. Not even Chick-fil-A sauce can beat that.