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“This the fasting that I want” (Isiah 58:6).

Isa 58:1-9a; Matt 9:14-15

Official efforts in China to tamp down news of the seriousness of the coronavirus outbreak was countered by an online activist who posted: “News coverage should stop turning a funeral into a wedding.” The post, with due irony, went viral.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus responds to criticism of his disciples for not fasting with the question: “Can the wedding guests mourn while the bridegroom is with them?” His presence was a wedding feast, so his disciples did not fast, though they would fast and mourn his funeral, “when he was taken away from them.”

The imagery invites us into a deeper Lenten reflection about how joy and sorrow are both part of our journey as disciples of Jesus. Those familiar with Ignatian spirituality will recognize the terms “consolation” and “desolation,” the funerals and weddings of life. Each moment has its role in disciplining us for discerning God’s presence in our experience. Loss is as important as gain in producing a mature individual. Those who only know how to celebrate are ill prepared for life’s downturns and crises, a lesson the whole world now seems to be entering as a serious epidemic threatens

the global community both physically and economically.

Perhaps now is a time for everyone to pray, fast and give alms, a worldwide awakening to the Lenten call to take God and our neighbors seriously. We will in fact be faced with involuntary fasting from unlimited consumption and easy access to material goods that rely on global commerce, travel and money. Our interdependence will be highlighted as both a source of contagion and an invitation to solidarity, one human family working together to solve a health crisis that will affect us all.

The scourge of war led to the inscribing of these words of Isaiah 2:4 on the wall of the United Nations: *They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

The question is, when will we weary of funerals and welcome a wedding to celebrate the rise of the Beloved Community that Jesus proclaimed as the goal of history? Then, perhaps, another quote from Isaiah will be added to remind the world of the remedy for the many injustices that cause so much suffering in our world: *This the kind of fasting I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked and not turning your back on those in need* (Isa 58:6-7).

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