

A Faith of Justice and Compassion
Isaiah 58:1-12
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
February 5, 2023
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It was like clockwork. You could count on him to be in the third pew on the right hand side of the sanctuary each Sunday. Not only was he there, but his wife and children, as well. Everyone commented on what a lovely family they were. After all, no one saw the bruises that he left, the bruises hidden by their church clothes.

She was the person the pastor knew he could always count on to fund a project. When the roof leaked, she got out her checkbook. When the youth room needed new furniture, she donated hers. When the office computer went kaput, she called her company's tech support and got a new one ordered. Her generosity was noticed and highly regarded. But while the pastor loved to see her coming, the servers at her favorite restaurant dreaded their most reliable customer who showed up each Sunday after worship ready to belittle them as she made demand after demand, and never even left a tip.

They were the best Sunday School teachers. They drew the children into the stories. They got to know the children, always asking about school and pets and friends and activities. Anyone who saw them interact with the children was amazed at how kind and patient they were. But, when a family moved in down the street, tattered clothing, broken English as they continued to learn, children lucky to have one good meal a day, those same idyllic Sunday School teachers became cruel with their insults, and withheld help and friendship they could have easily spared.

The reality is that we see it in big and small ways - too often we build a faith of religious practices or rituals instead of a faith that leads to a life of justice and compassion.

But much like the text we read in Micah last week, today's text from Isaiah reminds us that God wants so much more of us than fasting and praying, almsgiving and worship rituals. Not that these practices are bad, but when they become the extent to which we practice our faith, when they become the totality of our faithfulness, when they become the checkmarks we put on our to-do list, when they become substitutes for faithful living, then they have become a barrier between us and the heart of God.

Here in Isaiah 58, we hear a critique directed at the people of Judah, from one of their own. This isn't an outsider who has come to criticize, but rather someone who is on the inside, but who recognizes the wide gap between who the people are and who they are called to be.

By this time in the book of Isaiah, we are well beyond the fall of Jerusalem, well beyond the exile. By this time the people are returning, they are looking forward to rebuilding, they are working to find themselves again, to figure out what it means to be this particular people in relationship to this particular God, to rediscover themselves as a people of God. And so, they are having to learn again what that means, and how much it asks.

“The people of God ‘seem eager to know God's ways,’ writes Isaiah. As evidence of their faith, they appeal to their fasts.

“But Isaiah dissents — a privatized religious fast that ignores public ethics like economic exploitation is bad faith. A ‘true fast,’ says Isaiah, ‘looses the chains of injustice, sets the oppressed free, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and shelters the wanderer’” ([Journey with Jesus - Previous Essays and Reviews](#)).

The people have to learn again that it is justice - the leveling of the playing field, the shaping of systems that give everyone what they need - this is what God wants, far more than religious rituals and actions.

Joel Bengbeng, United Methodist District Superintendent in the Philippines writes, “Justice is when everyone has a place at the table with full access to the abundance of life...God...abhors liturgy detached from justice, prayer devoid of compassion, ritual not translated into mercy, and offerings not coupled with sacrificial love for others” (from The Upper Room Disciplines 2023 reading for January 24, 2023).

Just two weeks ago, Rev. Eric Rucker commented that our faith “is about the transformation of the human person so we become communities that are changing the world with God” (sermon at FCC, January 22, 2023).

Friends, we are people who believe in justice, who work to meet the needs of people in our communities, who are willing to have difficult conversations - and there are plenty of difficult conversations - about the way people around us are treated not only by individuals, but by the systems within which we have built our lives. We are willing to engage in these conversations, even to be challenged by them.

And yet, we, too, can be prone to pat ourselves on the back because of our religious actions. We can fall into the trap of feeling pride about our worship attendance or our increased giving or our willingness to say “yes” to serving in a leadership role.

And yet the words of Isaiah remind us that nothing that we do here, within these walls, within this worship service, within this community of faith, is about that alone.

Rather we are called together to worship so that we can be reminded whose we are and how we are to live, but then the real work begins when we walk out into the world.

We find value in practices such as prayer and meditation, for some practices such as fasting, for many of us practices such as financial generosity, but these are not acts in and of themselves, but rather are practices intended to lead us into deeper community with God and each other, practices intended to shape up so that we live differently than we did before.

Much to the disappointment of many Christians, the measure of faithfulness is not determined by perfect attendance in worship or a willingness to serve in any and all leadership roles. It is

not even determined by saying the most beautiful prayers or giving the most generous gifts. Rather, our faithfulness is measured by the justice and compassion with which we live.

I want us to hear part of this scripture again. I know it was lengthy and there was a lot there. But let's hear several verses from the middle of this passage.

Verse 3 begins in the voice of the people, "*Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?*" (Isaiah 58:3a)

The people have their own list of good deeds that they believe faithful people do and can't seem to figure out why it doesn't seem like they are making a big difference.

And then the voice of God answers:

*Look, 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 a wicked fist.*

*Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.*

*Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?*

*Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?*

*Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?*

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps 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?*

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn..." (Isaiah 58:3b-8a, NRSV).

Friends, we are called to be people who carry God's light into the world. And we are challenged to carry it not in our words, but in our deeds, in the ways that we make life better for others, in the ways that we break down the injustices and build up the reality of compassion for all people.

May it be so.