

An Outward Faith
Isaiah 58:1-12
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
November 12, 2023
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

We hear the echo of these words from Isaiah in other places in scripture including from prophets like Micah and from Jesus. They are reminders that our faith is not something we practice only in beautiful sanctuaries or with fasting and praying. While these practices are meaningful and can support our faith, scripture reminds us time and time again that true faith is lived out in how we treat others, especially those who are hungry, unhoused, impoverished, and separated from community.

Today, at First Christian, is what we call our Alternative Gift Market. This is something we do each fall as the holiday routines are gearing up. It serves two purposes.

First, it is a moment for each of us to pause and to ask how we want to engage the holidays, especially with spending. The reality is that we live in a culture that is driven by consumerism. And most of us spend too much money buying too many things for people who already have too many things. So, the first purpose of the Alternative Gift Market is to invite us to ask questions about our spending...about how we can honor those we love...and also about how we can use our money to make a difference in the world, a difference to people who are living in the midst of very real struggles.

The second purpose is to introduce people to local organizations that are doing the frontline work of responding to the needs in our community. Those who are here in person for worship have the opportunity to meet representatives from 10 organizations. Here in the sanctuary we will hear stories of the impact their services have made and have a chance to share conversation with these representatives after worship. We will also offer people the opportunity to support the mission of these organizations with financial gifts or to learn about how they can volunteer with them.

So, as people who are worshipping at home, whether here in this community or from a distance...as people who are worshipping from other locations because of being out of town this weekend...you might be wondering how you can engage in this day.

Let me share a few things with you:

First, you might be wondering who is with us in person with this week? We have representatives from the Iowa City Free Medical and Dental Clinic, Shelter House, Habitat for Humanity, Johnson County Affordable Housing Coalition, Coralville Food Pantry, Free Lunch Program, CommUnity Crisis Services and Food Bank, North Liberty Community Pantry, Table to Table - a food rescue organization, and Domestic Violence Intervention Program. Additionally, while they aren't able to have a representative here this year, we have the opportunity to support Houses Into Homes.

Second, I suspect you are wondering how you can support the work these agencies are doing. If you are on our mailing list, you will be receiving an Alternative Gift Market form. You can use that to indicate the agencies you would like to support and how much you are giving. Then you can mail it back to us with a check included. Meanwhile, there are many of you who worship with us from a distance, who don't live in this community. I would encourage you to look around your own community, to find out who is responding to the needs of those who are hungry or without sufficient housing, those who are struggling to find affordable medical care or exiting situations of domestic violence, those who are helping immigrants find stability in a new place - find those organizations and connect with them. Support them financially. See how you might volunteer to help with their work if you are able.

So, let me share a few stories of the type of work that is happening here, and if you live in another community - I feel certain that similar work is happening there.

Houses Into Homes tells the story of making a pre-delivery visit with a mother and her three children. They were living in an apartment that was entirely bare except for a few totes of clothing, some disposable dishes, and one pan. The Mom was attempting to make dinner with the minimal resources she had, and her kids were sitting on the floor against the wall, doing their homework on their laps. With overhead lighting only in the kitchen and bathroom, the living room was already getting dark on that winter afternoon. The representatives from Houses Into Homes talked to Mom about what items she needed. And while there were the big things - beds, a couch, a table and chairs - the reality is that it is the little things that sometimes make an even greater difference - pots and pans, a can opener, kitchen knives, hot pads, a trash can, a broom, hangers for clothing. These, too, are things Houses Into Homes can provide. (Houses Into Homes Newsletter, November 2023)

Then there are those times when people simply get behind on bills and it seems like they can never catch up. Stacy was one such person. Not only was CommUnity Crisis Services able to help her catch up on rent, but they also offered budget coaching to help her remain financially independent. "Receiving the help was a complete God send," Stacy said. "The staff members were so sincere, encouraging and judgment-free." Johnson County is one of the most expensive places to live in Iowa, and it can take careful monthly budgeting to keep your head above water. CommUnity's Financial Support team helped Stacy with skills to negotiate a living wage, create a budget, and stay within that budget ([Winter-Newsletter-FY23.pdf \(builtbycommunity.org\)](#))

Just last year several members of First Christian got to help with a Habitat for Humanity build. This was a house for a family of three generations. Together with community members, they worked to build the home that they were able to purchase at an affordable cost. When the home was dedicated, they welcomed volunteers, people from companies that had donated labor and materials, and neighbors into their home and the joy was evident on their faces.

And this summer a number of us served at the summer lunch program hosted by the Coralville Community Food Pantry alongside the Iowa City Community School District and a number of local restaurants. Children who during the school year depend on school lunch were able to come to the food pantry and enjoy a daily meal, often with some extras to take home. The day we served, a local restaurant had catered the meal - chicken tenders, fries, salad, and more. The families who were served not only had a meal that day but also an opportunity to do activities with the Children's Museum and to visit with firefighters and explore a firetruck.

These are just a few of the ways that people are being cared for in our community. And, while we are grateful for these organizations who are able to stretch their resources farther than many of us as individuals, we also know that much of the care and feeding, the compassion and welcome that people needs happens one-on-one, in relationships that get built between people.

Because caring for people, recognizing their needs, responding to their immediate needs and helping to rework systems so that the needs don't keep cropping up - all of these are acts of faith.

As Old Testament Professor Tyler Mayfield writes, "It is unlikely that the author of Isaiah 58 wishes to discredit completely the function of ritual exercises and cultic practices. They are necessary and deeply meaningful practices. But they always have the potential to become selfish, to become divorced from social engagement in the world. Isaiah 58 reminds us all of the need for social justice." ([Commentary on Isaiah 58:1-9a \[9b-12\] - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#))

After all, "Religious ritual when unaccompanied by social action is ... empty" (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-isaiah-581-9-10-12-2>)

And so we are reminded of our call - to feed the hungry, to visit the lonely, to house the unhoused, to find safety for those who are threatened, to offer compassion to each one. This is the core of faith. This is the call in our lives. May it be how we live. Amen.