

A Faithful Fast
Isaiah 58:1-9a
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
February 9, 2020
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We are back with the prophets today and this text from Isaiah may seem hauntingly similar to the text we read from Micah last week. After all, in both the people were focused on religious rituals or practices. And in both, the word from God was that the priorities needed to be in a different place. And yet, also in both, the shift was from practices like burnt offerings in Micah and fasting in Isaiah, things that are not commonly a part of our religious practices.

And it is so easy for us to be dismissive of texts such as these, especially when they challenge us.

If fact, over the years I have heard people who are quick to dismiss *anything* that comes from what we know as the Old Testament, saying that with Jesus we have a new law. And this attitude makes me incredibly sad. First of all, the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, are full of some of the most moving stories, most beautiful poetry, and most challenging instruction in literature. But even more important than that, Jesus was a Jewish person. Anything that we credit to Jesus was rooted in his understanding of Judaism. The New Testament God is not a different God, and Jesus did not change the rules. He only continued to communicate what God had been communicating for eons and continued to help the people see the true meaning of God's law. And that is clear if we listen to the words of today's text.

It is also easy for us to dismiss many biblical texts when we plant them so firmly in their time and pretend that they don't speak to us. And unfortunately, we usually do this to let ourselves off the hook. When it comes to asking what the word in the text is for *us*, how the text asks *us* to change, we are often slow to do so. And, this too, is unfortunate. If we are people of

faith who claim to have a book we call the Bible at the center of our understanding, then we must learn to live with it and to be shaped by it. We must also learn to interpret it so that it can continue to be the living document it was created to be.

So, what is the word for us in this text from Isaiah?

First, let's remember a little something about Isaiah. The book Isaiah is named after the 8th century prophet. But, as Dale reminded us earlier, the entirety of the book is not attributed to him. Rather it is understood to be in three parts that span several centuries. So, what we are reading comes from Third Isaiah, from the 6th century BCE.

And much like last week's reading from Micah, the people seem to be going through the actions of doing the "right" religious ritual but for the wrong reason. In this case it is fasting that is spoken of. The people, it seems, want credit for their fasting – for their faithfulness. And yet the voice of God comes and says, "But you are only doing this to be noticed. Your fasting isn't about really drawing closer to me. Your fasting isn't about learning to live in my ways. Your fasting isn't about taking care of others. In fact, you are using your feigned faithfulness as a weapon against others, as a reason to pick a fight, rather than doing what I have asked of you all along."

And, much as last week's passage from Micah ended with that famous verse about doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with God, this passage comes to a similar conclusion. We hear it beginning in verse 6, "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?"¹

¹ Isaiah 58:6-7, NRSV (emphasis added).

And again we are reminded that the rituals of religion are easy. It is the life changing power of living from the heart of God that is difficult. That is what is being asked here. And when we read it some 2500 years later, we should not read it as a critique of the people of Israel, but rather we should read it as a call to faithfulness for all of us.

Again and again, especially in the prophets and in the stories of Jesus, we are reminded that God's call is a call to create community that is life giving for *all* people. We are reminded that God pays special attention to those who are oppressed and outcast and suffering. And we are reminded that God holds those of us who are privileged enough not to be hungry or homeless, not to be suffering daily under the injustices of the system, not to be given less or pushed aside because of our demographic descriptions...God holds us responsible to help create a system of equity for all people.

No wonder the people around Micah were asking questions about what offerings would be enough. No wonder the exiles who had returned to Judah were focused on the religious ritual of fasting. No wonder we often like to point to our church attendance or our baptism date or our ability to quote scripture or our faithfulness in the supporting the church. Because, friends, these things are so much easier to measure, and honestly so much easier to claim success in, than doing the hard work of not only feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, but the hard work of addressing the problems in our systems – problems that many of us benefit from – problems that hold people in positions of hunger and homelessness, of oppression and injustice.

As a people who value unity and don't require uniformity for it to happen...as a people who value individual expression and who value the right of individuals to come to various conclusions and still be in community together...sometimes we find it difficult to also declare right from wrong and to remember that not all opinions or choices are created equally. As

members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we have long fought the reputation that because we don't come down with definitive denominational statements or have a long list of beliefs that everyone has to embrace, that means we are wishy-washy or that anything goes.

However, alongside our core values of unity and freedom of expression sits the value of using our ability to think and reason as we read scripture, as we look at the intentions of the scriptural writers, and as we come to understandings that impact our living. Alongside our other values sits the claim that scripture should shape our faith and that our faith should shape our living.

So, friends, when we read these texts from Micah and Isaiah, we are reminded that our faith is about so much more than showing up on Sunday mornings. Our faith is about so much more than joining a church or being baptized. It is about so much more than all the rituals the church might tell us are important.

Our faith is about how we live in this world and in relationship to others, especially the least of the others. And our faith is to inform not only our Sunday mornings but is to inform *everything* about how we live. It is to inform how we neighbor, how we use our resources, what work we do and how we do it, every decision we make. There is nothing in our lives that is separate from our faith.

And the prophets, in whose line Jesus stands, give us lists of priorities. The prophets aren't concerned with whether or not we check the boxes of church attendance or right offerings, but they are deeply concerned with how our living impacts others. And this is not only our individual living, but how our corporate living – as communities, as states, as nations, as people of faith around the world – impacts those we might call the “least,” those with less power, those with fewer resources.

The bottom line for the prophets is clear. There is a right and a wrong. And to be on the right side we must be concerned with the care of all of our neighbors, especially those who are least palatable to us. We must be concerned with those who are struggling under the systems that for many of us mean success. We must be concerned with those who can't pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, likely because they don't have any boots to begin with. We must be concerned with the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the injustices faced by people of color simply because of their color, the ways that even for all our advances women continue to fall behind.

The prophets never said don't go to worship or make offerings or fast or pray. But they did remind us, as did Jesus, that these things are signs of our faith but they are not the essence of it. Rather, our faith is measured by our willingness to change *our* lives in ways that change our world. Our faith is measured by our willingness to live with the interests of *others* at the center. Our faith is measured by what *we* are willing to sacrifice in order for others to thrive.

This is the true test of our faithfulness. This is the faithful fast.