

**EPIPHANY V, YEAR A**

5 February 2023

*Isaiah 58:1-12*

A couple, that had been married for a long time, were going through a sustained rough patch. They reached the point where they decided that they needed some help. So, this husband and wife went to couples counseling. There, the wife complained of how she took great pains to care for her husband, but her efforts went unnoticed: "He doesn't appreciate anything that I do for him. For instance, I make breakfast for him every morning; I make bacon and eggs day after day. Not once has he thanked me for going out of my way to do this for him." The counselor turned to the husband and said, "Would you like to respond?" The husband paused for a moment, then replied, "You never asked me if I liked bacon and eggs."

We have all had conversations like this, where we are speaking past the other person. We have all been in situations where we operate with good intentions, to show our love for another, but our actions end up being about satisfying ourselves more than they demonstrate a true love for and knowledge of another.

This story of the married couple came to my mind as I was reading Isaiah 58 in preparation for this morning. God's people Israel say to him, "Why have you not seen our fast? Why have you not seen us humble ourselves?" and God's response to them is, "on your day of fasting, you do as you please...". In other words, "you are not actually doing what I asked of you." The ways in which God's people, Israel, make offering to God is not what God has chosen; it is more about them than it is about their love and devotion to the Lord. Because on their day of fast, they continue to oppress; to enslave those among them. This has a historic context. There was a time during the period when Isaiah is prophesying when slaves were released from captivity by the Israelites, only for them to change their minds and enslave them once again. This is not something that God tolerates on a day set apart to honor him.

Another important piece of the context of this passage is the chapter that comes just before our reading today (cf. Isaiah 57). Here God calls out Israel for continuing to worship idols. If you were to start reading the Old Testament the beginning of Genesis and read straight through to this point in Isaiah, you may be rolling your eyes and saying, are they really still doing this? Are they really still practicing idolatry? This seems to be a perennial issue for the Israelites. Who is it that they are worshiping in the place of God? There were local tribal gods that had been worshipped since the time of the Canaanites, such as Baal, Asherah, and Molech. Some of these gods were thought to require terrible sacrifices. For instance, people sacrificed their children to Molech. There's a place outside the walls of Jerusalem called the Hinnom Valley where these sacrifices were offered. So, this was not a far off thing, but something happening within the community that they could see if they just looked outside the city walls. Often references to the 'dark place' in Scripture refer to this physical place of the Hinnom Valley. This seems like a pretty steep price to pay to an idol. And of course, God does not require human sacrifice from his people, so did not want the Israelites to be doing this. This sacrificial practise to false gods

also begs the question, what was the false idol being upheld above the Lord? Was it actually Baal, Asherah, or Molech? Perhaps yes, but a challenge that we must hear in Isaiah is that the idol is ourselves; we are guilty of self-idolatry.

I say this because, when people made sacrifices to false gods, it was their attempt to control the power that they believe these idols to have. If we recognize this, it makes idol worship more relatable. Because we do this sometimes in our own worship, don't we? We believe that God has power, and yet the shape of our worship is an attempt to seek our own end, or to gain that which we desire. And so, our prayers and our worship are shaped around a desired outcome, rather than being shaped by our love of God; in other words, we attempt to harness the power of God for our own 'wants'. This is why God says Israel, "Look, you serve your own interests on your fast day," (Isaiah 58:3b).

Israel is also accused here of hypocrisy, offering a fast to God while acting unjustly towards neighbour. As I was reflecting on this, God's message by the prophet Hosea came to mind: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, an acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings," (Hosea 6:6 NIV). This is a pretty important verse. We know this is because Jesus later quotes it twice in Matthew to the Pharisees: "Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," (Here Matthew 9:13; also Matthew 12:7 NRSV). What is the difference between mercy and sacrifice? If we think about sacrificing, we think about giving something up; particularly something that is difficult for us to part with. If we're fasting from food, for instance, we know that we experience the discomfort of hunger. So, what is the difference between that and mercy? Mercy also requires sacrifice, but it is relational. When I give up something in mercy, it is so that somebody else can have. For instance, when God speaks in Isaiah 58 of sharing bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, he is speaking about mercy: sacrificing our food and personal space for the sake of others. This is what God desires; not sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. The sacrifices that Israel offered to other idols were senseless ones. Mercy, on the other hand, is living simply so that others can simply live.

Now, if we look at the true fast as being an offering of justice, we must acknowledge that there is still potential for things to become unbalanced; to misunderstand what God asks of us. If the primary goal of our offering is the love of neighbor, divorced from the love of God, than we have not gotten things right. When I served in the Salvation Army, somebody paraphrased this chapter of Isaiah, to say things such as: "God we have handed out many gift hampers, we extended our food bank hours, and we collected money for extra time. Why have you not seen this?" The challenge of this paraphrase is to honor what Jesus tells us to be the first and greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," (Matthew 22:37 NRSV). He continues: "and the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself,'" (Matthew 23:38 NRSV). Can you think of a time when you tried to do the right thing, to do right by your neighbor, only to find that despite your best efforts, you ended up hurting more than helping? Things did not go according to plan. If we love the Lord our God first, and if love of neighbour is born out of our first love, this will keep us safe.

This morning when we hear this chapter, it is an opportunity for us to recalibrate; to remember that the love of God and the love of our neighbors is at the heart of all that we do. The chapter begins with God declaring to his people their rebellion. This may sound a bit harsh, but their rebellion is held before them, and before us, so that we listen; in this we are given the opportunity to turn back.

This invitation is a timely one, the season of Lent will be here in no time. I don't know if you find yourself in this situation, but almost every year on Ash Wednesday, I'm still trying to figure out what my fast or Lenten practise will be. Reading this text today gives us an opportunity to prepare for this time set apart. If we hear well, we can make the most of the time. And this is what it looks like when we make the most of the time: your light shall break forth like the dawn, your light will rise in the darkness (cf. Isaiah 58:8,10).

Have you ever known someone whose life reflected the love of God? Goodness characterizes your interactions with this person. The good news today is this: you can be that person. We can be that people. We can be salt, and light, as is noted in Matthew's Gospel this morning. Here's the funny thing about salt: in Jesus' time most of the salt in the Holy Land came from the Dead Sea. But there were impurities in the sea that would cause salt to lose its saltiness. The impurities erode the quality of the salt.

If you think about how this applies to what we offer to God, to our fasting, we need to be mindful that if we offer impurely, we too will lose our saltiness. Instead, we want our offering to be like the lamp on the lampstand that offers light to all around it. Not only can you and I be the kind of people whose lives reflects the light of God, we can be a community that does this. In many ways, ours is a community that already does this, in a landscape where people are worried about church decline.

This is the hope of the church that offers a true fast: "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong. You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt. You shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repair of the breach. The restorer of streets to live in," (Isaiah 58:11-12). May it be so for us. We pray that God will make our offering pure, so that we may participate in the work of his Kingdom come, in the communities that we dwell in and beyond. Amen.