

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-12

Isaiah 58:1-12--False and True Worship

¹ *Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!*

Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

² *Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.*

³ *“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.*

⁴ *Look, 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.*

⁵ *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?*

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?*

⁷ *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?*

⁸ *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator[a] shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

⁹ *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

¹⁰ *if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*

¹¹ *The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.*

¹² *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

A story is told about a man who found out it was his time to go to Heaven. He asked the Lord if he could bring just one thing. The Lord said, “No”. Finally, after many requests the Lord said, “You can bring one thing.”

Happily, the man packed his suitcase full of gold.

When he arrived in Heaven the angels said, “Sorry you can’t bring that in here.” He said, “The Lord said I could.” “Okay,” they said. “By the way, what’s in there anyway?” The man opened the bag, and they looked in. Then an angel said, “Oh. It’s pavement.”

What is really important to you? What gives your life meaning? For what does your soul long? How do you go about finding meaning for your life? How’s that working for you? These are some of the questions that come to mind after reading today’s text from Isaiah?

Without going into too much detail, I believe it would help us to understand something of the context of this text. The Israelites were a conquered nation, living in exile, torn away from their

home and suffering because of their disobedience to God's vision for them. Although they were suffering, we read that they had not learned from the consequences of their failures. Their disobedience continued. It was as though they lived in denial that they had done anything wrong. Of course, Isaiah, God's prophet, was there to communicate God's displeasure. Isaiah's starting point was the Day of Atonement. Fasting was prescribed by law for the Day of Atonement. The command to fast meant one was to go without food and water for 24 hours. On the Day of Atonement, freedom is proclaimed throughout the land to all of its inhabitants.

Isaiah told the exiled Israelites that their fasting was empty and meaningless. He went on to make the point that their faith was fake. They fulfilled the requirements of worship and rituals, only to walk away from the experience to live in a manner that revealed their true desires of the heart—which were selfish desires. Although they continued to cry out to God for help, they turned their backs on God by taking advantage of others for their own benefit.

Isaiah told the people that the fast that God recognizes is not one merely denying themselves of food and drink, but it is one in which they will feed the hungry, provide a bed for the homeless, and clothe the poor. It's revealing that the fast performed to satisfy selfish desires really is not motivated by a heart seeking God's will, so why should God take it seriously.

Isaiah told the people that their oppression would only cease when they allowed the light of God in them to shine and help to make the world a better place for others. He challenged them to consider why they should be allowed to go home if nothing has changed? Why should they be freed from exile when they mirrored their oppression upon the hungry, homeless and poor?

We too live with desires and needs. We live with a longing for meaning to our lives. We live in a consumeristic society that values the things of the world, hungering for power, fame, fortune, and always more accumulations. Even the church has assimilated in some ways to our consumeristic society by desiring more—more people, money, reputation, and influence. If we are not careful, in seeking these things, our fasts could become hollow and empty, meaningless to God, meaningless to us.

We all long for real meaning in our lives. Where do we turn to find meaning? In our country we have an array of items and foods to choose from and purchase to satisfy our desires and occupy our time; but those things often times satisfy us for a limited time and add little value to our life experience.

We may throw ourselves into worshiping God and praying for answers, but if our motivation is merely to seek out what we want and we never have any intention to listen to God's call on our lives to act on opportunities put before us, then our worship and prayers are empty and our faith is fake, so why should God listen to us?

As Christians, Jesus demands the same actions from us as the Israelites: feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, and clothing the naked. If we turn to Matthew 25:31-46, we read Jesus' parable about the goats and the sheep.

You may remember Jesus saying there to the sheep: "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me," concluding then that those who did these things would enter his kingdom. But the goats, on the other hand, did not do these things. Jesus concluded at this point by saying, "I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me." "Then those 'goats' will be herded to their eternal doom, but the 'sheep' to their eternal reward."

A casual reading of this parable may be interpreted to mean to some people that we should give to people what they ask for and, hopefully, need and send them on their way. I don't believe that is the intention of this parable—that would be too easy. Jesus doesn't tell us to enable people to continue addictions, or to further "use the system," or to continue ignoring financial responsibility and sinking further into financial ruin.

Helping the least of these involves treating the person as a human being, treating them as you would want to be treated if you suddenly found yourselves in their shoes. Help them with an immediate need, like taking them for lunch with you, taking them to buy groceries, giving them a coat and gloves. Give them a list, even take them to organizations with resources and programs to help them get on their feet. Sometimes, all they really need is someone to talk to and give them encouragement. We can't fix everyone, and some people don't want to change.

Helping the least of these means providing a safe space for children to learn about God's love and the goodness of people. Teaching them that they are of great value. Helping the least of these is helping at the Reach shelter and meeting the people who go there. Helping the least of these is providing a meal for the community, where the haves and have nots can mingle and celebrate the goodness of humanity. Helping the least of these is making colorful pillows for children to make them feel special. Helping the least of these involves going to a workcamp to help people in need or helping to build a habitat for humanity house.

Do these activities sound familiar? They should. Notice, none of these involves throwing a buck at someone and sending them on their way. All of them involve some personal effort from us and making face-to-face connections with people who need our help. If you want to find deep spiritual meaning for your life, you won't find it in stuff, you won't find it by faking faith and engaging in empty worship. The only thing this will accomplish is eroding your faith.

Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher, tells about the Roman aqueduct at Segovia, in his native Spain. It was built in 109 A.D. For eighteen hundred years, it carried cool water from the mountains to the hot and thirsty city. Nearly sixty generations of men drank from its flow. Then came another generation, a recent one, who said, "This aqueduct is so great a marvel that it ought to be preserved for our children, as a museum piece. We shall relieve it of its centuries-long labor."

They did; they laid modern iron pipes. They gave the ancient bricks and mortar a reverent rest. And the aqueduct began to fall apart. The sun beating on the dry mortar caused it to crumble. The bricks and stone sagged and threatened to fall. What ages of service could not destroy, idleness disintegrated.

Only when we practice our faith, worship with our lives in such a way will God hear our cries, for meaning in our lives. Until then, we are in exile, foreigners in an alien land, looking to return home to God. Real spiritual meaning only comes when we reach out and care for the least of these in our midst: the poor, the prisoner, the immigrant, and any who are oppressed. In doing so, our light will shine forth, and God will send meaning and hope to flood our lives. Amen.