

Peace and Justice for Fools

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Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

I find this morning's passage from Isaiah to be a thrilling read. It is worth hearing God's words again — I'll start at 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? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

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, 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.

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. 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.¹

Yes! I'm probably going to make the junior youth memorize that, it's so good. It should be quite easy for us to nod our heads along with these commands — we've got Warm Nights, refugee resettlement, food bank contributions, disaster relief, sister church relations, anti-racism, work for inclusion ... we could use some of these verses as a motto for our congregation. And as the passage says, "then you shall call, and the LORD will answer." Well, it looks like we have God on speed-dial.

¹ Isaiah 58:6-12 (NRSV)
Hyattsville Mennonite Church

But I have to wonder. What would Isaiah have to say to us? Would he pat us on the back and say “well done”? That doesn’t exactly seem his style. I wonder if, in fact, he would see our congregation as having an equal and opposite problem to the people he addresses. He might ask, if we have God on speed dial, how often do we call?

God says through Isaiah, “yes, you have fasted and kept the Sabbath. But you just did it for yourselves. What about service? What about justice?” Would God say to us, “Yes, you have performed works of justice and service. But do you remember why you do these things? Have you fasted? Have you kept the Sabbath?”

The intent of these passages is that justice flows forth from holiness — that Sabbath keeping and fasting are to be a source of justice. They are means by which God prepares us to do good works.

I sense that one function of our worship together is as an oasis — a place to be refreshed after a week full of stress and work. Many of you have responsibilities I can only begin to imagine, and you need this opportunity to rest in God’s presence. This is a good function of worship. This was one function of the Sabbath — to provide a regular rhythm of practicing God’s presence.

But worship that feeds and sustains is not enough. In the reading from Matthew we hear about salty and non-salty salt. What in the world is non-salty salt? Early church historian Alan Kreider has examined an interesting possibility regarding this passage. As traditionally interpreted, “salt” is a preservative — something poured over meat to keep it from spoiling in the days before refrigeration. Beyond that it was used to make things taste a bit better. But Alan

discovered historical evidence that salt was also used in antiquity as a fertilizer.² That phrase — salt for the earth — starts to come into focus a bit differently if he is right. Good salt would be tossed in small amounts on the earth — the soil — to help crops grow. And salt that was no good — the unsalty salt — would be tossed on the pathways to be trampled underfoot. We are to be salty-salt — a good fertilizer for the earth, not simply a preservative for what we have already.

Likewise, what we experience in worship is not only for our own sake, to preserve and shape our community as though we are simply a social club. Nor is worship even just for God's sake. It is both those things of course, but it is also for the world's sake. God calls us to view our worship and our work as one — to glorify God and follow Jesus Monday through Saturday and to seek justice and peace on Sunday, not just the other way around.

Think about the role singing has played in protest movements in recent history. From abolition, to women's suffrage, to civil rights, to ending apartheid and right up to Pink Mennos, spirituals and hymns have played a major role in bringing about justice and peace. The abolitionists put together their own hymnals and sang about equality before God. The suffragettes wrote dozens of revisions of Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," identifying their struggle with God's cause. Songs of faith originally sung by slaves were sung by their descendants in the face of water cannons and attack dogs. The streets of South Africa rang in four-part harmony as marchers declared that "Jesus is coming." And young GLBT and straight Mennonites clustered together outside of

² See Alan Kreider, "Salty Discipleship: Bringing New Worlds to Life," <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/291>

the convention halls at Columbus in an irresistible act of worship — singing the songs of faith well-loved in our tradition, and by doing so, declaring that this faith belongs to all of us.

Being a follower of Jesus is the foolish conviction that what we do today — singing our quaint little songs and reading our antiquated book, matters for the rest of the week and for the rest of the world.

On the surface we do not appear to be a bunch of fools. Compared to the general populace, our congregation is quite well educated and relatively well-off. We are rational, thoughtful and wise. We discuss and debate. We process and percolate. We are leaders and executives in many arenas of life. And yet we follow a completely foolish notion — that Jesus Christ, and him crucified, redeems us and redeems the world. As Paul says, this looks crazy to the educated, the wealthy and the powerful — it looks crazy to people just like us and the people many of you work with every day. It is irrational to believe that the teachings of a 30-something carpenter who was executed like a common criminal matter.

It is absurd to tell our stories and sing our songs and claim that we are his body. It is contrary to the logic of the world to believe that the poor deserve food and care as much as the wealthy or that men and women, gay and straight, black, white, Hispanic and Asian, can all come together on a Sunday morning and worship together. It takes a fool to believe that following in the example of Jesus' non-violence in the face of death can lead to new life. And only a fool could believe that any of this makes a difference to anyone outside of these walls.

And yet, when we do these things, when our worship is a work of justice and when our works of justice are an act of worship, God makes our light shine brightly, like a lamp on a hill. God makes us salt for the earth. God calls us on this fool's errand to change the world.