

Getting God's Attention

Isaiah 58:1-11

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. 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. "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. 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. 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? 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.

Introduction. *Hey God! Here we are. We have gathered here. Do you see us? We are worshiping you. Have you noticed what we are doing?*

In Isaiah 58, we hear the worshiping community asking these questions. The people have taken upon themselves some of the religious practices in hope that God will notice them and respond. They want God's attention. They want God's favor and to be treated fairly by their Creator. Yet there seems to be a sense that God is not present as they desire and not as responsive as they want.

Most of us, if we are honest with ourselves and one another, know how the worshiping community in Isaiah 58 felt because we have had similar experiences. We have known those times when God seemed a million miles away and unresponsive. Our prayers seemed to hardly rise above our heads and our religious acts seemed empty and meaningless. Yet deep within, we longed for God's attention and knew the importance of an intimate relationship with God.

As most of you know, Patty fell and broke her ankle three weeks ago. One of the blessings that came from that event was that our daughter-in-law and granddaughter stayed with us for a week. I confess it was difficult for me to leave the house to come to church in the morning but it was exciting to return. As soon as I would come into the house, Ana Grace would waddle toward me and lift up those arms to her granddaddy. At one year of age, she knows how to get my attention and to get from me anything she wants.

Isaiah 58 explores this topic of "getting God's attention" and "garnering his favor." It dives into some areas that may not be comfortable for all of us.

Personal Piety.

Often people within and outside the Christian community believe God responds to personal acts of piety, those religious acts that are central to the practice of the faith. For example, if one takes time to pray, then God will respond.

It seems the ancient Hebrew community believed this as well. If they could but perform the rites and rituals properly, then God would be near and bestow his favor. Here in our text the

particular religious act that is highlighted is one involving sacrifice – fasting.

There are only two acts as crucial to life as eating – breathing and drinking. Eating for nearly all human beings is done for more reasons beyond sustaining life. Eating can bring great pleasure as we taste and consume foods that are pleasing to the palate. (Prime Time Wednesdays). Eating often is a social event in which we enjoy time with family and friends. One of the most important events that leads to emotionally healthy children is sharing a daily meal together. Many of us conduct business over a meal.

Fasting is the religious act of abstaining from food and/or drink for a period of time. For most people, ancient, modern or post-modern, that is a significant sacrifice.

In the OT, fasting was largely a voluntary act. The Law or Torah only ordered fasting on the Yom Kipper, the Day of Atonement. It was a time of repentance for the people. All other occasions when the people fasted, it was a choice. At times, leaders would call the people to fast in the face of a national emergency. In the intriguing book of Esther, the Jews are called to fast when it is learned that they are being threatened with annihilation because of Haman's evil plot. People would often fast after the death of a loved one or national leader. When one had an urgent request to God, she might take time to pray. When one of David's children was born and struggling for life, his prayers were accompanied by fasting. In the NT, we find that the Church at Antioch fasted before sending Paul and Barnabas out on a mission trip.

Fasting has played a role in the life of Jesus followers throughout Christian history. In Christian tradition, fast days were set aside. Lent became a time of abstaining. Even today, when a person is seeking to be ordained as an elder (pastor) in the UMC, she/he is asked a series of questions. One is this: "Will you recommend fasting or abstinence, by both precept and example?"

With fasting being largely voluntary and such a sacrifice, wouldn't it seem God would pay attention to those who fast? Yet here we see the people were aware that God was unimpressed with their act of piety.

In our tradition as United Methodists, there are other acts that are important to our practice of the faith. John Wesley called these means of grace. Along with fasting, he felt the chief means were prayer, searching the scriptures, and receiving communion. He maintained these were channels through which God's grace often flowed into our lives. But they were not the "end of religion" but a means of practice. Their use could never atone for one's sin because atonement came through the grace of Christ. In our rich tradition, the practice of these acts is central to our personal piety or holiness.

From our text, it seems that even the most sacrificial act of piety can be hollow and unimpressive to God. Our text in no way condemns fasting or any other acts of piety but it does point readers to more complete understanding.

Social piety.

Why was God not pleased with the fasting of the people in our text?

For all who practice any type of religion know that at times the means we use to practice our faith can become very mechanized. We exercise our rites and duties thinking we have done our faith. Earlier in Isaiah, God addressed this issue in saying: *these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote* (29:13-14a).

While this is something for us to consider, it does not seem to be the issue in Isaiah 58. Here the emphasis is placed on failures in the social arena of faith practice. The people are lacking in the social piety.

What kind of fast does God desire? God wants a fast and all our other personal acts of piety to impact how we relate to others.

As United Methodists we come from a rich tradition that has long sought to combine personal and social holiness. While we advocate the importance of personal faith and practice, we believe that the social dimension is critical. The combination of these have long been a distinguishing mark of the Methodist movement beginning with John Wesley. Not only did Wesley teach and preach

about the personal practices but he also led in social issues of caring for orphans, visiting prisons and addressing social issues. Bishop Scott Jones in *United Methodist Doctrine* writes: *United Methodist doctrine holds both these concerns (personal salvation and social justice) simultaneously and views them as interdependent* (225-6). I would assert that a personal faith that fails to impact our social lives and actions is an impotent faith.

Our text shares three important aspects of social holiness that need to accompany our personal holiness.

One relates to how the people got along with one another. Listen again to these words: *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* (58:4).

How God's people get along is an important ingredient in their social piety. Our personal practice of faith needs to impact our relationships with each other. How we get along as a local church, a branch of the Christian family and as diverse bride of Christ are important. Our witness to the world is enhanced or tainted by how we relate to one another.

Getting along does not mean we will always agree on every issue. We are a diverse people, even those of us who worship here. Our social faith calls us to tolerance of each other's ideas, thoughts and practices. We are called to tolerate and appreciate the practices of other communities of faith. We need to get along with Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Episcopalians and Baptists. We are to dialogue not argue and fight. This takes work but this is who God calls us to be.

Secondly, our faith leads us to be advocates for social justice. "Justice" is a volatile word, especially in the Christian community, that for many is a code word for a particular brand of social activism.

In our text, there seem to be two levels of social justice addressed. One seems to be more focused on those areas where each person has personal influence. The other is in the public arena.

Do we work for what is fair and right in those places where we have personal influence? Perhaps you are a supervisor or employer – do you treat your employees fairly? Are they rewarded for

faithfulness, hard work and innovation? Do they reap the benefits of success? Do you treat those you hire for work around your home fairly? Do you conduct your personal business in an upright and honest fashion?

Several years ago, the van we drove began to show problems with the transmission. Because of its age, we decided it was time to trade. When we found the vehicle we wanted, we traded our van. I did not disclose the problems I was having with the transmission. After we drove the new van home, the salesman drove our old van to lunch and the transmission died. Some might call that a good deal on our part. In retrospect, I had failed to be completely honest. It was a matter of justice. (The next two vehicles I owned had to have their transmissions replaced.)

There is also the call for us to be advocates for justice in the public square. This can be complex because many issues are very complex, such as health care reform. We must be well-informed before we speak and be committed to serious prayer when we speak. I am thankful that this church has been a voice in the past. I understand that during the tumultuous times of racial unrest in Chattanooga, First-Centenary was a positive voice for justice.

The third area of social holiness involves caring for people in need – feeding people who are hungry, providing shelter for the homeless and clothing the naked. Our personal holiness should move our hearts in such a way that we would be moved into caring for others.

Earlier this month, Rev. Barry Kidwell, pastor at Forrest Avenue UMC, stopped by to pick up a check for the homeless ministry. It was because of your gifts he came. During communion Sunday, over \$700 was given to provide funds for the feeding of the homeless. Barry shared that recently for the first time in this ministry, they had been running out of food because the need is so great now.

Let me share one more story. Some within our congregation have gotten involved in an outreach called "Unity in the Community." Earlier this year, your church gave \$1,000 toward the renovation of a home in the East Lake area. A few of our people with some expertise were able

to take those funds and, along with some hard work, save the house. It had been condemned and the family was about to be evicted.

Invitation.

As United Methodists, we are a people of personal salvation and social justice. Today, we are called to pray and to work in our community. This is the day of our mission's fair. I challenge you to take time to go on the bridge to see opportunities to get involved. Several mission groups are there. Sign up – give at least 3 hours of time in the next three months. Sign up for an international mission trip.