

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

September 12, 2021

We Are Better Together

“Serving the World”

Isaiah 58:1-12

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A soldier was wounded in a battle and ordered to the nearest military hospital. Arriving at the entrance, he saw two doors: one marked “For Minor Wounds,” the other “For Serious Wounds.” He entered the door “For Minor Wounds” and walked down a long hallway. At the end of the hall, he saw two more doors. The first read “For Officers,” the other “For Enlisted Men.” The soldier went through the second door “For Enlisted Men.” Again, he found himself walking down a long hallway with two doors at the end. One read “For Party Members,” the other “For Non-Party Members.” The wounded soldier took the second door and found himself back out on the street. When he got back to his unit, his buddies asked, “How'd your trip to the hospital go?” He answered, “The people really didn't help me much, but, man, are they organized!” Are we, Killlearn United Methodist Church, a community of followers of Jesus who reach out to help those who are hurting or are we just another well-organized religious organization? Are we fully devoted followers of Jesus at Killlearn, who bring the love of Jesus to the world in caring for the needs of the world, who shine the light of Jesus in a dark world, who build bridges between Jesus and the world, who are a blessing to this world, and who bring God's healing love to broken homes? Let us hear what is most important to God as God speaks to us through the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 58:1-12

*“Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast.
Shout aloud! Don't be timid.
Tell my people Israel^[a] of their sins!
2 Yet they act so pious!
They come to the Temple every day
and seem delighted to learn all about me.
They act like a righteous nation
that would never abandon the laws of its God.
They ask me to take action on their behalf,
pretending they want to be near me.
3 ‘We have fasted before you!’ they say.
‘Why aren't you impressed?
We have been very hard on ourselves,
and you don't even notice it!’
“I will tell you why!” I respond.
“It's because you are fasting to please yourselves.
Even while you fast,
you keep oppressing your workers.
4 What good is fasting
when you keep on fighting and quarreling?
This kind of fasting*

will never get you anywhere with me.
⁵ *You humble yourselves*
by going through the motions of penance,
bowing your heads
like reeds bending in the wind.
You dress in burlap
and cover yourselves with ashes.
Is this what you call fasting?
Do you really think this will please the LORD?
⁶ *“No, this is the kind of fasting I want:*
Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;
lighten the burden of those who work for you.
Let the oppressed go free,
and remove the chains that bind people.
⁷ *Share your food with the hungry,*
and give shelter to the homeless.
Give clothes to those who need them,
and do not hide from relatives who need your help.
⁸ *“Then your salvation will come like the dawn,*
and your wounds will quickly heal.
Your godliness will lead you forward,
and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind.
⁹ *Then when you call, the LORD will answer.*
‘Yes, I am here,’ he will quickly reply.
“Remove the heavy yoke of oppression.
Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors!
¹⁰ *Feed the hungry,*
and help those in trouble.
Then your light will shine out from the darkness,
and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon.
¹¹ *The LORD will guide you continually,*
giving you water when you are dry
and restoring your strength.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like an ever-flowing spring.
¹² *Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities.*
Then you will be known as a builder of walls
and a restorer of homes.

RELIGIOUS APPEARANCES

Isaiah 58 was written sometime after the Israelites returned back home to Jerusalem from their exiled captivity in Babylon. When the Israelites returned home, they discovered that there was a poor remnant of the old Israel still living in the war-ravaged, poverty-stricken land. Things were pretty bleak back home and as a result the Israelites were questioning where God was in all of it. Their conditions were very challenging, and God seemed distant. On top of it all, the Israelites felt like they were keeping their bargain of being God’s people. They believed they were doing all the right religious things and yet it didn’t feel like God was keeping His end of the bargain. As it says here in chapter 58 the people were going to the temple every day to worship God. They were delighted to learn all about God. They said that they were now a righteous nation that would never abandon God’s laws. They prayed earnestly to God to heal their land and their nation. They said that they longed to hear from God. They even went so far as

wearing sackcloth and pouring ashes all over themselves when they fasted to show God just how serious they were. By all appearances they certainly looked the part of being a very devout, religious group of people. Yet, God says that things were not as they seemed. In truth their religious appearances and observances were nothing more than spiritual veneer. In the dental world, veneers are used to improve a person's smile, their teeth's appearance by attaching thin, customized porcelain or resin composite. In the world of dentistry, veneers are thin porcelain or resin composites that are applied to the front of teeth customized to cover the shape, size, and color of a person's natural teeth. The Jews religiosity actually served as a spiritual veneer that covered up the truth of what was really going on in their hearts.

FALSE WORSHIP

Through the prophet Isaiah, God called out the Israelites' religiosity which made them look like faithful followers of God when in truth their hearts were far from God. God tells them here in *chapter 58* that He was not impressed at all with their fasting as they were going about it for the wrong reasons. They were not fasting and praying with repentance, seeking God's will for their lives, and committing themselves to following God and aligning their lives with God's will. Instead, their fasting was only a tool that they were using to impress God and hoping it would then manipulate God to do things their way. They fasted only to please themselves. God says that while they were doing all this impressive fasting and praying, the rich business owners were oppressing their poor workers. The same ones who were fasting and praying were violently fighting and quarreling with each other. Hundreds of years later this same hypocrisy persisted as Jesus said one day to the hypocritical religious leaders in *Matthew 15:7-8*, *"7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 8 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 9 Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.'"* The people were all style and no substance. On the outside they appeared to be following God, but by their actions they were anything but what they seemed on the outside. They were faking it and God was not fooled.

A town in Northern Ireland spent a lot of time, effort, and money sprucing up its image for the arrival of some special guests. On June 17-18, 2013, the world's eight most powerful leaders gathered in the town of Enniskillen, Ireland for the G8 summit. In preparation for the special guests, which included President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the town put up fake storefronts on shuttered businesses. Dan Keenan, a reporter for the Irish Times, reports that the image-conscious village leaders "filled the shop front window with a picture of what was the business before it went bankrupt or closed." In other words, grocery shops, butcher shops, pharmacies, etc. placed large photographs in the windows so that if you drove past and glanced at the window, it would look like a thriving business. Keenan continues, "It looks as if the door is open and inside you can see a well-stocked shop. It's nothing of the sort. That door has been locked shut for well over a year because that particular business went bust this time last year, and that is an image to make it look as if everything is normal in the town and in the county, but unfortunately

it's not. [In reality, the entire county] has suffered terribly as a result of the credit crisis and the resulting recession." Interestingly, Keenan also claims that the ordinary citizens of Enniskillen are skeptical of these shallow attempts to make everything look rosy. They'd rather present the town in its most positive light without attempting to mask its current financial problems.

God is not impressed with how often we go to worship, how much we give in the offering plate, how much Bible knowledge we have, how well organized our church is, how much we pray, how long we have been members of the church, what committees we serve on, how often we fast, if we have taught the Bible our entire lives, if we are just going through the motions pretending to be something we are not. God is not impressed with any of that if we are gossiping, backbiting, playing power and political games in the church and out in the world if we are quarreling and fighting with others if we are not loving our families if we are not taking care of the poor if we are treating our employees harshly or not giving them fair wages if we are not taking care of the homeless. The list can go on and on.

WHAT GOD REQUIRES

God says here in *Isaiah 58* that if His people want God to hear their prayers, if they really want to be His faithful followers then they are to free those who were wrongly imprisoned, lighten the burden of those who work for them instead of treating them like lowly slaves. They are to stop oppressing the poor and stop pointing fingers at each other and spreading vicious rumors, stop being a party to injustice and corruption, cheating others in your business practices, etc.... Instead, they need to be feeding the hungry and helping those in trouble, taking care of those in need, and doing what *Isaiah 1:17* says, "*Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.*" Along this same line God tells what he requires of His people in *Micah 6:8* saying, "*No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*" Jesus basically said the same thing as the prophets when He said to His disciples in a parable in *Matthew 25:34-40*, "³⁴ *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. ³⁶ I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'* ³⁷ *Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? ³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ *And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'"* One last passage from one of the disciples who wrote what is required of us in *James 1:26-27*, "²⁶ *If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.*"*

If our walk with God does not lead us to care for the needs of this world, our walk with God is useless and God is not impressed. If we are walking closely with God then it will especially show in how we treat each other and whether or not we serve God through touching the needs of those in the world. From Old to New Testament, God calls on His people to care for the hurting, the needy that come in all shapes and sizes. God wants us all to be Good Samaritans whose neighbor is anyone in need in our lives. God's expectations of us who call ourselves Christians is that we care deeply about the brokenness in our world, and we make ourselves available to God to treat them with the same compassion and mercy as Jesus did. Lee Strobel, in his book, *The Case for Faith* says, "On my door there's a cartoon of two turtles. One says, 'Sometimes I'd like to ask why he [God] allows poverty, famine, and injustice when he could do something about it.' The other turtle says, 'I'm afraid God might ask me the same question.'" I truly believe that our church at Killlearn has many opportunities to touch the hurt and brokenness in our world. We can serve people in the world by helping to build access ramps into their homes through iServe, we can serve those that are hungry through our Foodbank ministry, Brian's Brigade, or French Town. We can reach out to our sisters and brothers in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Cuba by praying for their challenging situations, visiting them, and using our resources to help them in the various challenges they face. We can register for our September 18, Sleep in Heavenly Peace bunk bed build for children who do not have adequate beds here in our local communities. That's just a sample of ways we can serve our world. There are countless other ways God can use us in our workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, our communities to show random acts of kindness to those in need.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

If we will make ourselves available to God to reach out and serve the world around us, God says that the result will be that salvation will come like the dawn, wounds will quickly heal, godliness will lead us forward into the world, and the glory of the Lord will protect us from behind, at our backs. When we then cry out to God in prayer, Isaiah 58 tells us that God will quickly reply when we call on the Lord. We are also told that when we serve the needs of this world our light will shine out from darkness the darkness in the world will become as bright as noon. As we go out into the world to serve we are promised that the Lord will continually guide us, refresh us with His living water, restore our strength, and we will be like a well-watered garden, an ever-flowing spring in a parched, stagnant, dying world. God will use us to rebuild a broken world and restore broken homes. In other words, God will use us to shine the light of His love in this dark world. God will use us to be like a preservative in this decaying world. God will use us to be a blessing in a world that can often feel torn apart and cursed.

Imagine the difference that we can make in this world if we will live our lives as people of God's truth, justice, grace, mercy, love, and compassion in this world. God would then change the world one person at a time. God would then use us to be the answer to the Lord's prayer whereas we serve the needs of this world, God's kingdom will come and God's will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God has strategically placed you in this world in our courts systems, at the state Capital, in government, in homes, in

non- profit agencies caring for those in need, in recovery ministries, in prisons, in schools, in businesses, all in places where God can use us to reach out to this hurting world. We can influence this world for the good of the Kingdom of God and in so doing, gradually turn the darkness into light, heal the broken, build bridges between racial divides, feed the poor, train the jobless to work jobs, counsel, teach, etc

My prayer for us at Killearn is that we will passionately pursue following in the footsteps of Jesus by bringing Jesus' love to this world by serving the needs of the world. May we truly be Christians like those that St. Augustine described when he said many years ago, "A Christian is: a mind through which Christ thinks, a heart through which Christ loves, a voice through which Christ speaks, and a hand through which Christ helps."

Icebreaker I – What are some examples of "false fronts" you have encountered in your life? (Social media?)

Icebreaker II – What is your profession / hobby? How can you be God's mind, heart, voice, and hands to those within your circle of influence?

1. In Isaiah 58, what ways did God's people seem to do the right thing?
2. How did they spoil it?
3. How did their view of fasting differ from God's?
4. If their fasting was sincere, what would be different about their relationships with others?
5. What is the connection between religious exercises like this and a concern for justice?
6. How is personal spiritual renewal related to seeking justice for the poor?
7. In which religious activities do you find yourself just going through the motions?
8. How should these activities impact us individually and as a community?
9. How are they affecting you now?