

Sermon Text for October 20, 2024

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Isaiah 56:6-8 and Matthew 15:10-20

"You are what you say"

There is something about being with people that you have lived with in church that is unique. I had a wonderful time in North Carolina marrying off a former confirmation class kid, and being with her parents with whom we were very close while we served in Russia. Every time that I spend time with people with whom we served side by side in settings such as this one it is very special and very different. When you live life together in a church it almost brands you, it marks you for life and creates a bond that is very, very powerful.

Every time that I walk in this building, every time that I see you around town, it feels good, it feels safe. When we gather on these Sunday mornings together it feels like a refuge, a little bit like comfort food when you are sick and you just need something warm to pick you up for the day or for the week. Church is so much more than that, but it is also that, right? Coming back here is like coming home, there is a familiarity that is not seen in other places and warmth of feeling that you don't feel in other places.

Now, when we do gather here together there needs to be a connection between what we do in here on Sunday morning and what we do out there for the rest of the week. I try to stay away from sermons that have too much moralizing, you know just giving you the basic what you are to do, or a list of rules that you have to follow. There is more to faith than just doing what is right, but it does include doing what is right. We shouldn't say it doesn't matter what we do as long as we believe the right thing, as if having a relationship with Jesus is all that matters and not our relationships with other people or how we live in this world. That doesn't make sense. But if there is a disconnect between what we believe and what we do, well, that is a problem.

Both of our Scriptures today speak to the difficult realities that must be faced even while we live in the midst of people we love and even as we are together living out this faith journey together. The tendency and the temptation to separate what we believe and what we do is very, very strong. Jesus says no, what we do and what we say is actually a reflection of our heart, who we are. I remember coming back to the United States in third grade and my teacher, Mrs. Previti at Ventnor Middle School taught us that you are what you eat. Today we are going to learn that we are what we say. Let's read.

READ

We find in our reading a beautiful image during a time that was not so beautiful. We have seen a lot from Isaiah in our time together over the years. Every time that you read Isaiah I want you to remember what was going on in the nation of Israel during that time. What were the people of God facing. It is important because many of us think that what we are living in now or the future that we are potentially facing is the worst in the history of humankind. Isaiah was writing in a time when the entire nation had been conquered, overcome in a war, and all of the people were carried off to the country that had defeated them and they were living as exiles and slaves in this other country, Babylon. Every time that we read Isaiah together you need to say to yourself, I think I have it bad, boy, what they are going through is so much worse than what I think we are going through.

So, in this midst of this slavery and exile Isaiah paints a beautiful picture of one day these foreigners, you know the ones who burned down our city and pillaged our families and had their way with our children, one day these foreigners will be worshipping God just like we are. Look at vs.6, the foreigners will join themselves to the Lord, they will be joyful in my house of prayer, right here in the church.

The people of God are experiencing a time where that which they used to value is no longer accepted. The things that used to be important are no longer important and there is an existential threat that is currently happening that is threatening their way of life and their life in general. Some people feel that way now. What Isaiah does for us is lay out a time period in the history of the people of God that was traumatic, where the future is unknown but probably incredibly bleak and dangerous. What do we do as Christians in the face of such a mess? How do we act, what do we do, what do we say. And is there a separation between what we are facing today and our faith. I mean, can I focus on what is best for me and my people during the week and then love God on Sundays? That's okay isn't it, I mean after all, we are living in really important times right now.

Let's begin at the very beginning of this chapter in Isaiah. Read 56:1, someone read that out loud. There is never an excuse for not maintaining justice and doing what is right. No matter what is happening in your life or in your country, you always have to maintain justice and do what is right. Did you know that 2/3rds of the people who love Jesus in this world are outside of the United States? I hope the feeling that you had after World Communion Sunday has

remained with you. That feeling that we are all connected one to each other not only here in this country, but in all of the world. That the foreigners that we read about here in Isaiah are the Belarussians, are the Hondurans, are the Chinese, are the Palestinian Christians, are the and you fill in the blank. We don't live on an island where it doesn't matter what we say or do in regards to others in the world. It matters and what we do or say reflects our heart and our relationship with Jesus.

When we worship with people who think different from us, live different from us, vote different from us, raise their kids different from us, spend their money different from us, it makes you think. What's the role of my faith in my life when our lives look so different from other Christians around the world? If we say that we love Jesus but then ostracize, look at vs.8, the outcasts and say they aren't welcome in this church, or look at vs.6 exclude the foreigner, then we are like the Pharisees. The Pharisees as we are going to see in our second Scripture, who really only want religion for the utility that it provides as opposed to the relationship that is at its heart. Any true relationship requires an opening of the heart.

Jesus knew that it was that which he was trying to teach the crowds and his disciples as well. He is still in Genessaret, a few miles south of his hometown Capernaum, and he has just had a rough face to face with the pastors of the town, they didn't really like him. He calls the crowd and they gather around him and he tells them I want you to do two things right now: listen and understand and you expect him to tell the crowds what they have to do in order to please God, what rules are they to follow. Instead, he tells them what not to worry about, don't worry about what goes in your mouth or whether you perform a religious ceremony or not, worry about what you do and what you say, because that is more reflective of who you are.

I try to steer clear of sermons that establish rules for you to live by. I don't want to create a legalistic environment in this church. But sometimes we just want to be told what to believe and what we need to do, it makes living life so much easier. But we aren't Stepford wives following a single code that has been implanted within us like a chip which removes any all initiative and thinking on our part. I don't tell you what the rules are, I try to remind all of us of it is who loves us and created us and who Jesus is which ought to motivate us to live in a way that please him. It isn't rules that I give you to follow, but rather a relationship to strengthen that which gives you life.

But having said that, sin does exist, we do fall short of the glory of God. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees in these verses because they are pushing the belief of a separation between church and life. If you follow the rituals, go to church on Sundays, wash your hands, follow the purity laws, get married in the church by a pastor, bring your Bible to church, eat kosher food, then it doesn't matter what you do with the rest of your life. Now, all of these things are good, but they don't define the relationship that you have with God. What you do or what you say reflects your love for God.

Jesus goes on to list in vs.19 the sins that come out of the heart that are often overlooked by the Pharisees because you can do both. You can follow the religious traditions and sin in the ways listed. If you do both, Jesus says, then according to the Pharisees they kinda cancel each other out. One good religious act can compensate for one heinous sin, since all sin is heinous. The disciples don't understand and they say as much to Jesus. We've been told our whole life that our relationship with Jesus is defined only by how much we read Scripture, how much we pray, how much we give, how many committees we serve on, how involved we are in the life of the church. Are you now saying that the measuring stick for our relationship with Jesus is actually so much more than what we do in church? How does that make sense?

Jesus says, what about the other 6 days of the week? Then in vs.19 he gives this list and it is a list that we often have but which we try to compensate for with our spirituality. Murder we justify by saying they deserved it or they were our enemy. Adultery we say that he didn't love his wife anyway. I remember early in my ministry at the orphanage in Italy we had about a dozen international volunteers who served with us in the building with the boys and one of them was having an affair with an Italian and we were talking about it and I said something like, you do know that it is adultery right? And she was offended and said no it isn't, he doesn't love his wife anyway.

Jesus goes on, fornication but how far is too far, no one really knows if you are unmarried. Theft, they should be paying me more anyway. False witness, the ends justify the means. Or slander, they don't amount to anything anyway. We come up with intricate systems of justifying our sin without actually considering it or calling it as sin. And our sin has far reaching impact, a ripple effect, that goes well beyond our own small circle. We know how the sin of one can impact not just a family, but a church and a community.

There is no spiritual practice that can compensate for sin, in fact, Jesus goes further as he states that it actually reflects our state of affairs because what we say and what we do reflects our heart. Remember what God said to Samuel in I Samuel 16:7 when he to choose the next king of Israel: “For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

We can at times be guilty of placing our desires ahead of God’s moral will. We think that if we love God correctly then we don’t have to worry about loving our neighbor. Today in our country being a Christian almost seems to give you a free pass to disregard Isaiah 56 which tells us to embrace the outcast and to welcome the foreigner. What has defined Christianity in the past no longer is valid. We are what we say and do, not the rituals and traditions that you keep or the correct belief system that you have.

Today, it is as a Christian the sin that we commit which defines us in the culture. This sin which concerns the evil thought, words, and deeds that come from the heart. Moral righteousness is far more important than ritual purity or a spiritual lifestyle with disciplines that only affect you personally but doesn’t affect how you interact with others. Faith without works is dead says James. What the Pharisees did and what we are in danger of doing is to fail to address sin as a radical human problem. But the overcoming of sin was essential to the purpose and the work of Jesus then and now. Amen.