

The Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2021
Lenten Lessons from the Garden
Part Three: The Well-Watered Garden
The Spiritual Practice of True Fasting
A Sermon Based on Isaiah 58:1-12
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Some of FCC's Beautiful Gardeners!



At this critical moment in our nation's history, when we continue to lose loved ones in a global pandemic, when many are experiencing unemployment and do not know how to put food on the table or pay their rent, when folks in Texas and Mississippi still are without drinkable water not only because of extreme weather conditions but also because of inadequate infrastructure driven partly by greed, when there is a huge economic disparity between rich and poor, when we have recently experienced flooding in our community, and when partisan divides have reached a breaking point with violence in our Capitol and a government arguing over a much needed relief package, listen to these timely words from the prophet Isaiah (58:1-12) in the Message translation, written to those who, like us, claim to be religious:

1-3 "Shout! A full-throated shout!

Hold nothing back—a trumpet-blast shout!

Tell my people what's wrong with their lives,

face my family Jacob with their sins!

They're busy, busy, busy at worship,

and love studying all about me.

To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people—

law-abiding, God-honoring.

They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?'

and love having me on their side.

But they also complain,

'Why do we fast and you don't look our way?

Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'

3-5 "Well, here's why:

"The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit.

You drive your employees much too hard.

You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight.

You fast, but you swing a mean fist.

The kind of fasting you do

won't get your prayers off the ground.

Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after:

a day to show off humility?

To put on a pious long face

and parade around solemnly in black?

Do you call that fasting,

a fast day that I, GOD, would like?

***6-9 “This is the kind of fast day I’m after:
to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.***

***What I’m interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.***

***Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.***

***Your righteousness will pave your way.
The GOD of glory will secure your passage.***

***Then when you pray, GOD will answer.
You’ll call out for help and I’ll say, ‘Here I am.’***

***9-12 “If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people’s sins,***

***If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.***

***I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.***

***You’ll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.***

***You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.***

***You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again. (Is 58:1-12, Message Translation)***

“St. John of the Cross, alone in his room in profound prayer, experienced a rapturous vision of Mary. At the same moment he heard a beggar rattling at his door for alms. He wrenched himself away and saw to the beggar’s needs. When he returned, the vision returned again, saying that at the very moment he had heard the door rattle on its hinges,

his soul had hung in perilous balance. Had he not gone to the beggar's aid, she could never have appeared to him again." (David Whyte, in *The Heart Aroused*).

This story about St. John of the Cross points to the central issue of Isaiah's message: whether our religious life should be centered on inward spiritual practices, piety, and formal worship or rather relate to outward action in the world. Is religion personal or social? Is there a relationship between the two?

It is the period between Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BCE and before the temple's restoration in 520-515 BCE. The prophet Isaiah is writing to the Israelites who finally have returned from exile in Babylon, which began in 587 BCE. They may have been feeling fatigued, disoriented, anxious, and perhaps even abandoned by God. It seems that some conflict may have broken out between those who were exiled and those who remained behind in Judah. Over many years these two different communities worshipped differently and now questions are being raised about true vs. false religion through a discussion of a religious practice they all were well familiar with: "fasting."

Ritual fasting was an important and common spiritual practice for the Hebrew peoples. Some of their fasting was an expression of repentance. In the books of Esther, Joel, and Jonah we find that people were called upon to fast as an act of repentance for their sins both as individuals and as a nation, hoping to appease God and prevent destruction or calamity. In Esther 4, the Hebrew people fasted so that they might be spared. In Jonah 3, the people of Nineveh fasted so that God might not destroy them for their wickedness. Let's listen to what it says in Joel about fasting, a chapter often read on Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent:

*Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
2 a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
... Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,
but after them a desolate wilderness,
and nothing escapes them.
...¹² Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,*

*slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.* (Joel 2: 1-2, 12-13, NRSV)

This belief that fasting could help spare a person or nation from calamity continued through the ages. The Presbyterian religious leader Marjorie Thompson noted that the Protestant Reformer “*John Calvin followed the biblical tradition of interpreting major disasters as divine messages. He urged that when war, famine, plague, or other natural calamities threaten a nation, ‘the whole people ought to accuse themselves and confess their guilt.’ He felt that regional threats obligated local pastors ‘to urge the church to fasting, in order that by supplication the Lord’s wrath may be averted.’*” (Soul Feast, p. 79)

The ancient Jewish community engaged in fasting when they were mourning. They did not eat, wore sackcloth and ashes. Fasting also is appropriately used as a way for people to purify their hearts before encountering or undertaking a mission for God. Examples include Moses (Exodus 24, 34) and Elijah (I Kings 19), who go off into the wilderness for 40 days and fast. Jesus went off into the wilderness for 40 days where he also fasted before beginning his ministry. We remember this event at the beginning of Lent when, on Ash Wednesday, we are asked to make vows that often include giving up something. Some might give up chocolate, social media, Netflix, alcohol, or even negativity. The idea behind this is that by giving something up we create an inner space so that we might be filled by that which is from God. This idea of emptying our ego so that we might be filled by God is beautifully summarized in Deuteronomy 8:3 when it says of the Israelites fleeing slavery and journeying through the wilderness to the Promised Land that: ***He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.***

In our passage today, the prophet Isaiah addresses a form of pseudo-religious fasting that is misdirected by making a person appear to be spiritual and in good standing with God but which is actually displeasing to God because it is totally self-oriented. Isaiah shouts out at the beginning of the passage that people should listen up! They might think that God is pleased with them because they’re very busy worshipping and engaging in all kinds of Bible study and small groups. They put on a wonderful façade as being a “nation of right-living people,” who are “law abiding” and “God honoring.” They go to church, pray, take communion, put something into the offering plate and, during Lent, they might make a Lenten vow and even fast. But then they wonder why their pious

actions aren't paying off. They aren't getting the results from God they are expecting. They shout out to God saying "Hey God, look at me! I'm fasting. I'm being super religious. I'm keeping my end of the bargain but you're not keeping yours! I didn't get that raise I expected. I didn't get the medical diagnosis I wanted. I lost some money on my stocks." Isaiah makes it clear what the problem is. He says that their understanding of fasting is very different from God's. Their fasting is about "giving up" but not "giving to." Their fasting does not make a difference in how they treat others. They might go through all the right gestures, have a pious look about them, tell others about what they are doing so as to appear holy. But God sees through the façade. Addressing especially those of financial means who have food, shelter, and nice clothes, those who may even own businesses that employ people, or are managers who supervise others, Isaiah says that:

"The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit.

You drive your employees much too hard.

You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight.

You fast, but you swing a mean fist.

The kind of fasting you do

won't get your prayers off the ground....

Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after:

a day to show off humility?

To put on a pious long face

and parade around solemnly in black?

Do you call that fasting,

a fast day that I, GOD, would like? (Isaiah 58:3-5)

God, Isaiah says, has a completely different idea about what fasting is. It specifically includes working toward economic justice in societies where there is a huge gap between the rich and poor. God wants to break the chains of injustice by getting rid of exploitation in the workplace and other unfair practices, freeing the oppressed, canceling debt. A true fast for God involves outward action in the world as we share our food with the hungry, invite the homeless poor into our homes, clothe the shivering ill clad, give of ourselves to the down-and-out or what Jesus calls the "least of these," and treat our family members well. Additionally, we are to stop finger pointing, shaming others, and gossiping. We are to be "repairers of the breach" (NRSV) as we seek to overcome the many divides in our society that marginalize others. It is these actions, not personal piety, that constitute a true fast in God's eyes (cf. Micah 6:6-8).

We know that Jesus identified with this prophetic tradition when he showed, through word and deed, that personal piety without outward action leading toward the betterment of people's lives was empty. In his inaugural sermon he even quoted directly from the prophet Isaiah when he said that God has ***“anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*** (Luke 4: 18-19; cf. Isaiah 61). Later Jesus stated that we would be judged not by whether our thinking was correct or our personal piety acceptable but rather by whether we had fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited those who were imprisoned (Matt 25). That's what matters! And that's precisely what the prophet Isaiah says true fasting is all about. A heart filled with God that then reaches out in loving service to others to strengthen them and the world around them. When we fast in this way the world begins to take on another form that resembles a beautiful garden! Isaiah says when we do these things we will be like ***“a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry”*** (Isaiah 58:11; cf. Isaiah 61:11). We might call this fast a form of gardening for God, in which our hearts become so filled with God's loving presence that we can't help but want others to experience God's loving presence too. We garden for God by planting seeds that build the kind of life-giving society Isaiah pointed to that is based on God's mercy and justice.

Our fellow Disciples of Christ minister, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, founder of the “Repairers of the Breach” and co-founder of the important Poor People's Campaign, reminds us that giving help must also include bringing hope. He learned this early on, growing up at his Grandmamma's knee. He wrote that:

“[I] grew up not only in my parents' home but also at my grandmamma's. My father's mother was, in so many ways, the spiritual anchor of our family. She had a way of watching over her children and grandchildren—of paying attention to the whole community—and seeing what was really going on. An elder in the traditional sense of our African and Native American ancestors, she kept the wisdom of those who had gone before her and passed it down to us, the next generation. ... When we were growing up, Grandmamma and her nieces always cooked for the whole family (and for anyone else who happened to stop by). When I was at her house, I often sat with them in the kitchen. They would hum songs from church as she rolled out biscuits and stirred pots on her old gas stove. They also had a ritual whenever the food was done. Grandmamma would take a bottle of the anointing oil that she rubbed on people's heads when she prayed for them and slip it into the front of her apron. She and the other ladies would take some money, a

rag, and some of the food they'd cooked and they would say, 'We'll be back shortly. We've got to go and hope somebody.'

*As a young black boy learning proper English in school, I thought my uneducated grandmamma was misspeaking—that she mistook the word 'hope' for 'help.' ... But looking back, I see that Grandmamma articulated more theology in that single phrase than some preachers manage to get into an entire sermon. As a person of faith struggling to survive in a society that so often despised her and the people she loved most, my grandmamma knew that any prayers worth their salt had to be accompanied by food for the hungry. She and other mothers of the church practiced 'visitation' as a spiritual practice, every bit as important as Sunday worship or Holy Communion. She knew in her bones that faith and works, belief and practice were inseparable. And she knew in her careful choice of words that love in action was not simply about helping people. It was a practice of hope that both enabled others to keep going and helped her to keep her eyes on the prize and hold on." (Wm Barber, *The Third Reconstruction*, pp. 3-4).*

It seems that Rev. Barber's Grandmamma not only understood but faithfully also modeled to her grandson what the prophet Isaiah said about the kind of fast that God chooses. She was helping to sow seeds and water God's garden as she helped and "hoped" others. Let us likewise choose God's fast as we tend to God's garden in our own community by, among other things, sharing our food with the hungry as we stock the Blessing Boxes and give to Need Line, attend to the homeless by buying candles to place in our windows that raise money for the Homeless Coalition, and put clothes on the shivering ill-clad by donating to Angel's Attic. Let us also, in the aftermath of a once-in-a-century winter storm, be generous in our giving to the Week of Compassion offering so that, through our donations, we can put boots on the ground in places like Jackson, Mississippi right now where there is little running water. In doing so we can help create ***"a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry."***

Closing Prayer: May not only the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, but may our actions also help create a society that is like a well-watered garden with a gurgling spring that never runs dry, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.