

## **Isaiah 58:1-12**

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. 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.

**Action** - February 9, 2020

*Isaiah 58:1-12*

For several weeks, I have been speaking about the importance of going beyond the mere mechanics of being in church and instead focussing on building a personal, spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ. In other words, we are not here just to meet friends, sing songs, pray, and otherwise think about God. No, this service of worship, the fellowship we share, the education we receive, and the mission we do is all intended to bring us closer to Jesus. To the extent that our time together builds our relationship with Jesus, the more your time spent here is truly worthwhile. On the other hand, if your time here is not drawing you increasingly closer to the Lord, maybe we need to talk, because we as Collingswood Presbyterian Church and I as your pastor may well be failing. If we are failing you, we must ask what possibly are we not doing.

The reason I am adamant about encouraging you to build a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is that Jesus is truly the best and indeed only foundation for our lives. You don't need me to tell you that life can be difficult, complex, disappointing, and saddening at times. We go through hard times when it seems like there is very little hope or good news. We experience suffering and challenges that we fear may never end. For most of us, the tough times do not last forever. We are able to move beyond whatever we're struggling with and find a new and often even better normal. However the days, weeks or months, or years during which we are struggling can be formidable and discouraging.

That is why, friends, having a relationship with Jesus is so critical. It is difficult to have faith during the hard times, even for those here who have endured challenges in the past. But for those who view Jesus as just another well-meaning guy or our worship as a kind of history lesson, keeping faith is nearly impossible when times are rough, and challenging even when times are pretty good.

Having a relationship with Jesus is truly, as the word relationship implies, a two way street. Christ is Alive! Jesus is not some mere abstraction. Through faith, Jesus can and will inform and animate every part of your life. Through faith, you can have the inner peace you need to endure because you know you are not alone. Through faith, you become aware that just as you believe in Jesus, you embrace the fact at the same time, Jesus believes in you.

But what then? Having a foundation of faith in Christ does sustain us at all times, but to what end? What is this faith thing really about, especially when Jesus is mixed into it?

Increasingly, Americans make a distinction between Spirituality and Religion, almost portraying them as opposites. Moreover, it seems that for many, the word Spirituality is associated with Higher Powers, bright sunshine, awe-inspiring views, the Northern Lights, and the cries of newborn babies. All wonderful, feel-good events to be sure, but simply that: feel good events that demand next to nothing from us.

Religion, at the same time, has many negative connotations. Religion is associated with rules, hierarchy, hypocrisy and empty ritual. Spirituality is freeing. Religion is confining. Spirituality touches the soul. Religion touches only the wallet. Who wants to call themselves religious when it is much more acceptable just to say, "I am spiritual?"

Yet for all its supposed problems, religion and spirituality do have something in common: they both assert and assume every human being has a soul.

Yes, a soul. There is something in each one of us that has the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. There is something in us that can sense the presence of God, or the Higher Power, or whatever you wish to call it. There is something in us that even nags us to do the right thing, whatever that may be. And both Spirituality and Religion claim that the presence of the human soul is a gift from God. There is no way we could have evolved it ourselves.

It is not for me say how soul is part of us nor say, as some scientists do, that what we call the soul is merely a bunch of cells that reside in a corner of our brains. For me, at least, it is enough to say that my soul is real, just like the annoying "check engine" light on our cars is real. We can't see our souls and when our cars are running properly we never see the check engine light. But when we encounter difficulty or challenging decisions in our lives, our souls do spring into action. And when our cars have mechanical trouble the check engine light springs into action. And yes, to end this imperfect comparison, we human beings have the ability to ignore our souls just as we drivers have the ability to ignore the check engine light. Be aware, however, our choice ignore either or both of them comes with extraordinary risk.

The modern distinction between spirituality and religion is, in fact, a false dichotomy. In other words, saying Spirituality is somehow "good" and Religion is somehow "bad" completely misses the point of both. Essentially, spirituality without religion is mere wishful thinking. Religion without spirituality is just empty words. One is not good and the other bad. They need each other.

One excellent illustration of this point is today's scripture from the prophet Isaiah. He is criticizing the people of Israel for their religious practices. Aha! You may say, there it is, empty words, just like you said. Even God's prophet said so.

Yes, the religious practices Isaiah spoke of were empty, because the people were going through the motions, but not really understanding what they were doing or why they were doing it. Hear how Isaiah went after the people. He said, "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." In other words, the people performed religious rituals and thought that just by saying the words or making a token effort God would be pleased with them. But in reality, the people were just pretending. They did not understand or practice what God really wanted them to do.

Isaiah was talking about the practice of fasting — of going without food — sometimes from sunrise to sunset, sometimes for a full 24 hours. Fasting was a normal religious practice in those days. It is done sometimes even today. Perhaps, when we understand the reasons for it, we will fast more.

However, in those days, throughout the year, there were set days where the people were supposed to fast, usually from sunrise to sunset. Any healthy person can endure not eating for 12 or even 24 hours or more. Fasting does not harm our bodies and some scientific research today even indicates that fasting may actually help our overall health.

But in those days, when people had a ritual fast, they made it well known. It was traditional to go around looking starved and complaining about how much their stomachs hurt. They were showing off to each other and to God. Somehow they thought God would take notice of their suffering and therefore reward them. They thought that by engaging in this religious ritual they were getting closer to God. In fact, the manner in which they conducted their fast repelled God.

The idea of fasting, back then and even now, is to remind those who fast that the body and life is more than just eating. Food is necessary for life, but food is not life. Food is just another physical, material object in the world, like money, clothing, houses, or cars. The idea of the fast is that it focusses our attention away from the things we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste and toward the God that created these things in the first place. Even the occasional hunger pangs we get while fasting are supposed to build us up spiritually even when our physical bodies experience some discomfort. Fasting, in other words, is intended to be food for the soul.

However, the fasting experience, however well intended by the religious leaders of Israel, was badly misunderstood by the people. They often expressed surprise when God did not notice the supposed sacrifice they were making when fasting and were thus extremely disappointed. People would ask questions like, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” In other words, “Hey God, we’re putting ourselves out for you. We’re inconveniencing ourselves for you, how about something in exchange? Huh?”

Don’t we sometimes think the same way? “Hey God, I put \$100 in the plate, send some luck my way. Hey God, I prayed hard for five minutes, give me the answer I want. Hey God, I put up with my nasty in-laws over Christmas, that ought to be worth something, right?” But Isaiah called out their hypocrisy, just as he calls out ours. Isaiah told the people point blank, when they got all proud of their supposed sufferings, “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.” In other words, you are supposed to fast to get closer to God. Instead you use the fast to benefit yourselves. How could God possibly be pleased with that. This is a clear case where the religious practice was indeed correct, but the spirituality behind it was all wrong.

Friends, it is great to experience the awesomeness of God. I've said it once and I'll say it again: "awe" and "awesome" are words that have been badly abused in the English Language. Once upon a time, they were used only to refer to deep, personal, holy encounters with God on the most spiritual level. Awe once upon a time truly moved us inwardly. Now these words are just synonyms for "cool," "great," or "wow."

But the point of our spiritual encounters with God should be to motivate us to wanting to know more and more about the God who enables us to feel awe in the first place! Fasting is intended to be a spiritual experience. It was created by human beings to help us get move closer to God. As we move closer to God, Isaiah reveals what fasting is supposed to do. He tells how the religious ritual and the spiritual feeling compliment each other. Spiritual fasting is supposed to lead us to right action.

Isaiah says, "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..." In other words, when we fast in a way that draws us closer to God, we will be filled with the desire to bring God's creation closer to way God intended things to be.

In short fasting, along with every religious ritual, is supposed to put flesh, human flesh, on the spiritual impulses we experience. When we have a spiritual encounter, the point is not, not, not, to tell ourselves, "Ahh, that was nice" and go out to dinner. No, every spiritual encounter we have should make us wonder in our hearts, minds, and souls about the God who gave us the ability to appreciate spiritual encounters in the first place. Having experienced God spiritually, it is the task of religion to translate our spiritual experiences into action by means of our rituals and what we actually do in the world.

I hardly need to tell you that this has been a very intense week in our nation. I don't need to repeat the news. Some of you may be expecting me to comment on what's going on. But I won't. If you are looking for commentaries, turn on the TV or read the innumerable websites. My role, the role of the church, is not to tell you what to think about current events, but to proclaim the Word of the Lord from the Old Testament prophets and the testimony of Jesus Christ and his followers. But as the prophet proclaimed so long ago, it is not enough just to hear the words, but also do the words. We all have souls which are put it us by God. We all have brains to think with which are designed by God. We all have bodies to act with which are built by God. Today, in our hearing, we have heard what God expects of us. It is time to focus our souls, our minds, and our bodies on God and act to restore God's creation to what God intended it to be in whatever way God leads us forward.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.