

I had a conversation this week about 'erring on the pastoral side'. When there's a question of what to do, I'll always lean toward being caring, loving, and empathetic. As a pastor, I need to suspend judgement. But as Christians, you're all called to do the same thing. It can be summed up in 4 simple words: Less judging. More loving.

Isaiah is having a similar conversation with the folks in this passage. Immediately prior to this scripture, Isaiah has just pointed out the hypocrisy of the people. They fast, supposedly to bring themselves closer to God, but even though they fast, they then do as they please, exploiting workers, quarrelling with each other, and injuring one another.

If Isaiah were here today, instead of saying, 'you fast', he might say (and forgive me because I know I'm preaching to the choir here), 'you go to church and then....' You go to church and then coming out of the parking lot, you immediately cut someone off on York Street. You go to church and you post hurtful things on facebook. You go to church and that same afternoon, you exchange angry words with a family member.

Isaiah is angry because God is angry. Ultimately, anger stems from pain. The people are hurting God, and God is still reaching out, saying 'come back to me.'. The prophet's job was always to get people to see what God sees and to call people back to God.

If they were aligned with God, they'd be aligned with each other. They are not. So the prophet calls them back to God, inviting them to see things differently.

I've got a few things to show you now. On your insert, you'll see several images. What does the album cover say? Letters and numbers. (Oh, you ate one, too?) What's the next image? A six? A nine? How about the woman? How many of you see an older woman? How many see a younger woman? It's a matter of perspective.

Isaiah and the people are seeing the same things, but seeing them differently. The people think they just have to deny themselves food to get close to God. Isaiah says the kind of fasting God wants is to refrain from feeding only your own interests and to instead feed others. If you're going to fast, take that time that you would have spent eating and use it to minister to others. Take the money you would have spent on food and use it to minister to others.

God's perspective is always one of love. And love always wants what's best for the other. Always. In a world of many, God will always call us to care for the other. The one without. The one who is hurting. The one who is lonely. The one without.

So, friends at First Parish York, what is **your** response? Because God calls us to respond **every** time we see a need. Isaiah's prophetic voice calls us to **see** the need. Not to avert our eyes on the street or change the channel on TV or put the newspaper down or to scroll past it online. God calls us to notice it and to engage, in a way that alleviates the suffering of others.

What if this life is a test and God is watching each and every time you have the opportunity to give money or time or otherwise be helpful? What if that person on the street corner holding the sign asking for change is Jesus?

You may remember a few months ago, I spoke of prioritizing and I mentioned my friend Gay. Gay had written to me and I hadn't gotten back to her. We'll, I finally did and we had lunch here in York a few weeks ago. She was filling me in on mutual friends that she's been more in touch with than I have and she told me about Sister Bridget Haase. Sister Bridget is a nun in the Boston area. She's worked with those who have traumatic brain injuries, she's authored five books, and she's semi-retired now. She's got to be in her 70's-or so now, but she still ministers to others. A year ago, she was recognized as "Crewmember of the Month" at the McDonald's where

she worked two days a month. She wasn't working at the counter, but instead cleaning tables and restrooms. This particular McDonald's is across the street from Father Bill's Place, a homeless shelter for men and women. And many of the folks who have to be out during the day go over to McDonald's for the dollar menu, or to keep cool in the summer, or to use the facilities. Sister Bridget used to engage the folks in conversation.

Gay told me that Sister Bridget had to give up that work, but she's got a new ministry. It's a ministry of \$5.00 bills. When she gets monetary gifts, she has been known to convert \$10's and \$20's into \$5s and hand them out when she sees a need or when she receives exceptional service. For some, that money makes all the difference. For others, it's a sign that someone cares.

The kind of fasting Isaiah wants is the kind that refrains from hurting others and instead helps others. This passage from the prophet is a bookend to the passage from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says that the righteous will be those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend to the sick, and visit those in prison.

What prevents us from helping? Is it self-interest?

True fasting is to “loose the bonds of injustice and break the yoke of oppression”. It's feeding the hungry and providing shelter for the poor wanderer. It's clothing the naked and not turning away from the needs of others. This is hard work. It requires that we suspend judgement and respond to the needs we see.

It's not just responding to the immediate needs, but resolving systemic issues so that the oppression and disparity doesn't continue. This is even harder work.

And that's the down and dirty work. The kind that gets dirt under our fingernails. It's the kind that keeps us up at night because of concern for other.

Fasting as Isaiah describes it involves actually depriving ourselves of something so that we may give it to another. It involves—getting involved. Isaiah invites us to see what we may not have seen previously. See the need. And respond to it.

He doesn't say sit quietly by and don't do any harm. He says, speak up...do something. Oh, and there may be some temporary discomfort in it for you as in fasting when we go without. In fact, when we feel the hunger pains, they can be reminders of the pain that others are feeling.

Prophets in Biblical times were tolerated even when they were feared or resented. People don't like to hear the truth when it points out flaws or weaknesses. People don't like to hear the truth when it's critical of the things they say or do. But it's often the constructively critical remarks that make the most impact. They're the things we remember.

As your Interim Senior Pastor, I am seeing things in this church differently than you may see them. So let me ask you, “Who are we? (As a community of faith?) Who is our neighbor? (And what are their needs?) And in light of the first two questions, “What is God calling us to do and become?”

We say in our Mission Statement that we respect our diversity and courageously advocate for justice and mercy, and intentionally respond to the needs of our community and the world. We have a lot of great programs to care for those in and beyond our own faith community, but how are we courageously advocating for justice and mercy?

I appreciate that you used the word courageously when you crafted and adopted this statement. It recognizes that there's some risk inherent in the declaration that all is not equitable and that we are called to publicly support forgiveness and pardon (mercy) when it's not the popular thing to do.

Isaiah offers prophetic intervention in this passage. He's giving those of us with privilege the opportunity to see and assist those who have none. He's intervening on behalf of what Jesus later calls, 'the least of these'.

When you care for others, your light shines. It radiates out and provides help and hope and guidance for others. When you do this, you will repair and restore ancient foundations. Perhaps as ancient as the very beginning when we were all family with God as our father. Blessed be and amen.