

Michael McGowan

Isaiah 58:6-12: Prayer Barrier: Our Actions Towards Others

Preached at Trinity CRC

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This is our 6th Sunday of looking at prayer.

It is our prayer that this series has encouraged you to spend more time before the Lord...

Seeking out his will...

And offering him your praise.

In previous sermons we've mentioned some barriers to prayer:

Not understanding what prayer is;

Not knowing how to pray;

Distancing ourselves from God's Word...

His primary way of speaking to us...

And as a consequence having our prayers butt up against his will.

This morning we're going to be talking about a specific barrier to prayer:

Our actions and our attitudes toward others.

I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 58...

We'll be looking at vv. 6-12:

⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

¹¹ The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.

You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

There is a wall between God and his people.

It’s a barrier that keeps their prayers from being acknowledged by God.

The people send up their prayers to the Lord...

But they get stopped at the border crossing...

Unable to pass through or around the solid concrete wall that stands 20’ high.

In Isaiah 58:3 we’re told that the Lord “does not see”—

We’re told that the Lord “does not notice” what the people are saying and doing in appeal to him.

In chapter 59 we’re told that it’s not because the Lord is unable to save—

He is definitely capable;

And it’s not because he can’t hear—

His ears catch everything.

We’re told that it’s the sin of the people.

The solid concrete wall between God and his people—

This wall that is keeping out their cries for restoration—

Has been built by the people themselves...

Block by block, made of their sins.

“Your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.” (59:2, NRSV)

And in our passage this morning we’re given more detail about those sins:

They’re not so much sins directed against God...

They’re sins against other people.

The Israelites at this time are back home in Jerusalem.

They’ve returned from exile but times are tough:

From verse 12 we can guess that the walls that once surrounded the city are still torn down;

The Temple where the people used to worship is most likely still in ruins.

It probably wouldn’t be that different from the pictures you see of Mexico Beach, Florida after Hurricane Michael rolled through...

With most of the streets and buildings no more than piles of rubble.

The people are back in Jerusalem and they’re trying to rebuild their lives...

They’re looking for restoration and renewal.

And from all outward appearances it seems like they’re seeking the Lord...

Eugene Peterson says it this way in the Message Bible:

“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’re doing these religious things like fasting and appealing to God for help.

(Fasting in the Old Testament was often accompanied by wearing sackcloth, putting ashes on the forehead, lamenting, and prayer.)

Israel is expressing their grief and appealing to God for restoration—

Attempting to move God to compassion in their distress—

But their religious activities and prayers for help are hitting a barrier...

And it’s because of their sin.

Their outward religious actions are right...

But their hearts are wrong.

In their daily dealings they're depriving people of liberty and turning their backs on the poor:
(Ridderbos, 256)

Most likely taking as slaves those who default on their loans;

Keeping debt-slaves longer than the allowed 6-year period;

Denying food to the hungry, keeping clothes from the naked, and letting the wanderer continue to live on the streets...

Justice is not being served...

And those living in distress receive no mercy from the well-to-do Israelites.

And so the Lord refuses to listen to and restore the people.

As a church we too are seeking renewal.

We're appealing to the Lord to offer his guidance...

Not because our walls are broken down and we're in a bad spot—

We're actually in a good spot as a church—

But because we want the Lord to continue to guide Trinity...

To breathe new life into this church...and to lay out our path for the next 50 years.

As we appeal to the Lord through prayer, it would be wise to ask if we've put up any barriers...

Do we have any blind spots like the Israelites that might hinder our prayers for renewal?

In the city of Edmonton in 2016 there were over 1,700 people experiencing homelessness:

Over a quarter of these were women and nearly 150 were children:

That's people living on the streets, living in motels, living in addiction facilities, or emergency shelters...

1,700 people created in God's image...

That's about 5-6 times the amount of people worshipping here this morning.

And those numbers don't include the tens of thousands of people living in affordable and social housing.

(<http://homelesshub.ca/community-profiles/alberta/edmonton>)

So we must honestly ask ourselves:

As a church in the city of Edmonton...

Is there anything that we're doing to contribute to the problem?

Do we have any prejudiced attitudes?

Are there groups of people who we automatically put at a lower level?

Do we have feelings of being self-made?

Like we deserve what we have and "they" just need to work harder that work to tighten these chains of oppression?

Do we have sins against others that in turn push us away from God?

Or are there opportunities before us that we turn away from?

Has the Lord put us in a place as a congregation to do more with what he's given us?

We've given our money, but have we spent our whole being satisfying the needs of the oppressed, the hungry, and those in despair?

Because we're called not just to feed the hungry, but to spend ourselves in their behalf. (58:10)

Fasting in the religious sense is a denial of something good.

We give up food and water...we deny ourselves.

And the fasting that God desires is denying ourselves so that others may flourish.

If Israel joins these actions to their right religious activity—

If they do away with the yoke of oppression...

And turn toward their fellow man and woman instead of turning away—

Then he will hear their cry...

Then God will say, "Here am I..."

And he will bring about their restoration.

This points us to what God is all about...

What lies deep within his heart:

It is to hear the cry of the poor, the afflicted, and the oppressed.

Listen to these verses that point us to God's heart (primary concern):

When Israel was enslaved in Egypt...under the harsh treatment of Pharaoh God said:

“I have seen the *misery* of my people. I have heard them *crying out* because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their *suffering*...the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are *oppressing* them.” (Exo 3:7, 9)

Looking back the people say:

“We cried out to the Lord...and the Lord heard our voice and saw our *misery, toil and oppression*.” (Deut 26:7)

Even when his people sinned and got themselves into a bind, he heard their cry.

From the book of Judges:

“Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for his people, he was with the judge and saved the people out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their *groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them*.”

Psalm 81:

“In your *distress* you called and I rescued you.”

From the book of James:

“The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.”

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...”

It is God's character to hear the cry of the poor, widow, orphan, refugee, oppressed, and afflicted.

It is his heart to care for those desperate for help.

We may read this passage and think, “God, why don't you hear us when we pray?”

We may be putting ourselves in the shoes of those who are fasting...

Who are performing the right religious activities...busy, busy, busy in worship...

But what about those crying out?

What about those who are *being* oppressed?

How does this passage sound to them?

To know that there is a God on their side—

When everyone else ignores you...

Pretending like they don't see you or hear you...

Walking past you like you don't even exist.

And when others have their hand on your back...

Holding you down...keeping you in your need—

What's that like to know that there is a God who sees and hears...

To know that there is a God who weeps at your pain...and gets angry at the way you're treated?

Because this is God's heart.

He is the God who brings freedom to those in chains...

And healing to those whose lives are broken.

You may be sitting here this morning with a few different reactions:

Maybe you feel convicted about the way you've been living.

You're a Christian, and you come to church regularly...

You read your Bible and you sing songs of praise...

But you're convicted because your ears have been deaf to cries of the poor, widow, orphan, the elderly, and refugee—

Those who are most vulnerable in our society.

You've been worshiping God, but missing his heart for *all* people.

I invite you to sit in that conviction...

Allow the Spirit to continue working in your heart...leading you to repentance.

And know that Jesus Christ has covered your sins.

If you hear him calling you to spend yourself on behalf of the vulnerable...

Do not hesitate to respond to his prompting...

This is his invitation to join him on mission.

Maybe you're hearing this message from the other side...

As one who feels oppressed...

One who has been beaten up by life...you feel like you have footprints on you back from getting walked on.

You're tired of being ignored...

Or looked past as if you didn't exist.

You're tired of being tired from life.

You may even feel like God or his people have been doing the oppressing.

I invite you to know God's heart...

To know his concern and his love for *you* (individually).

He is not the author of sin and brokenness...

In fact he's come to heal and to mend.

He's come to put a soothing balm on wounds caused by life's struggles and disappointments.

It is God's heart and his mission to work renewal in this broken world.

We know that God went "all in" when Jesus Christ came down from heaven.

God saw the pain we were in...

He knew that as long as sin separated us from him, we'd always be broken.

So he did what it took to bring us back into relationship with him.

Jesus Christ willingly went to the cross to die a painful, physical and spiritual death...

So that we would be healed.

God heard the cry of these people oppressed by sin (our cry)...

And he went "all in" to rescue us...

To love us, and bring us back to him.

Because this is who God is...

Full of mercy and compassion...

Bringing restoration and healing to a world torn apart by sin.

And this is the mission we're invited on.

To join him as he redeems everything he's created.

And as we do this—

And do it his way...

By giving ourselves to those in need—

He'll restore what's been broken and breathe new life into our midst.

We'll "rebuild the ruins and raise up the age-old foundations"...

We'll be called "Repairer of a Broken City."

All by the power of his Spirit living in us and working through us...

Bringing glory to his deserving name.

Amen.