

“Greater Righteousness”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Isaiah 58: 1-12 and Matthew 5:13-20

Paul Hanson, in his commentary on the Isaiah passage, titles his remarks, “Your Own Interests, or the Interests of God?” Is that what you heard when the scripture was read? Did you find yourself considering your own interests? Did you find yourself judging others for what they do or don’t do? It’s a common human trait that we often are far better at considering what others ought to do instead of reflecting on our own actions or inactions. Dr. Hanson reminds us that this passage – a powerful passage at that—is a “polemic directed against a group described as self-righteous and meticulous in religious observances. Its members engage in theological study, seek out divine oracles, engage in cultic rites, and fast. But, according to the prophetic voice in this passage, it is all a sham, mere external motions, hypocritical acts that fail to meet the test of genuine religion.” I wonder what God, through the voice of the prophet, would say about religion in America today? Before we run to say what we think God would say about them, it’s important that we consider what God might have to say to us! There is greater righteousness than what we have been practicing.

For many in religious circles, our love of God is shown in our worship. That’s true. But despite our pious acts in worship, the scriptures call us over and over again to compassionate justice. I’ll agree that sometimes it’s hard to know what compassionate justice looks like, and some of our best efforts have been completely misplaced. Our

critics, most of them who spent little time in the actual church, and even those that did, rightfully point out that religion has caused a lot of pain in the world. God—and later Jesus—have been used to support all kinds of selfish, mean, even homicidal acts. Religion has been used to support slavery, the subordinate role of women, abuse in various forms, and oppression around the globe. Often, religion has simply been a way for people of faith to do what they want while doing exactly what the Bible prohibits—the complete dehumanization of the “other.”

I hope that when you heard the Isaiah scripture, you found in it something challenging for you. For me, I am all for helping the homeless any way we can, but Isaiah called for us to take the homeless into our homes. That rattled my cage. I don’t know that it means that I change anything, but while many of us look to the Bible for our truth, we had better be careful to read it all before we decide we are living out God’s plan. This is not a guilt trip. Rather, it is a reminder to be careful when we point a finger at someone else, for it might just be that many more fingers point back at us—regardless of your faith stance.

The point here is that there are many institutions, practices, and ways of being that can be used in horrible, dehumanizing ways. I’m not calling on all of you to leave the church because the church has made mistakes. Instead, I’m calling on all of us—no matter who we are—to consider whether our righteous judgment of others might also be placed at our own feet.

Hanson says it this way:

In a community where those who regarded themselves as the most religious [in Isaiah’s day] had converted religion into private acts of study and ritual, thereby

leaving the entire realm of social relations and commerce under the dominion of ruthless, self-serving exploitation, the prophet reaffirms the classical understanding of Yahwism that grew out of the experience of God's liberating slaves from their bondage, feeding them in the wilderness, and giving them a homeland of their own. It is a rigorously moral understanding that places the one who would be true to God on the side of the same ones whom God reached out to help and empower, those suffering injustice at the hands of authorities, those imprisoned for acts of conscience, those denied their fair share of the land's produce, those denied housing and proper clothing, those turned away even by their own relatives. The appeal is an impassioned one to the heart of the community. It is a plea to reclaim authentic humanity by replacing cold, calculating self-interest with acts of loving-kindness that restore genuine communal solidarity.

But the prophet doesn't end with just the polemic. Instead, the prophet calls on us to be "repairers of the breach." You see, the future of humanity will not be a positive one if everyone is totally focused on themselves. And while you may see it more on one side of the political aisle than the other in this country, it is true that both sides are guilty. Our future is not in the hands of a political party, politician, or public figure. Instead, "a nation must be [built] upon a foundation that is both consistently moral and deeply spiritual if the calamities of the past are not to be repeated. No aspect of the nation's life therefore escapes prophetic scrutiny. For every aspect of life is within the domain of God's concern. For us in the church, which means that our worship is purified by our loving-kindness of the other.

Jesus then comes to us in Matthew's Gospel, preaching his most important sermon that most people ignore—the Sermon on the Mount. You'll find it in Matthew 5. You the "blessed are those who..." statements. It's after those more famous, though rarely taught, statements of Jesus that we arrive at our Gospel lesson for today. "You are the light of the world...You are the salt of the earth." The common denominator is "you are..." Jesus is in some ways talking to individuals, but really Jesus is talking to a community of faith. And

what we call for in this section is “a radical form of discipleship, one characterized by ‘superabundant’ righteousness.” Brian Blount, one of the authors of *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* writes, “Better’ righteousness begins from the inside; it is integrally linked to an interior disposition wholly subservient to God and God’s mission.” In other words, it’s about our relationships and our behavior.

Beginning from the inside, behavior, community, relationship...these are the main points of both Isaiah and the message of Jesus. Yes, you are the light of the world, but in order to be that light, we have to expose ourselves to the prophetic challenge that we are not always as right we think we are. And, even if we are right, then we are called to work for change in accordance with the word and ministry of Jesus Christ. Sometimes that will involve turning tables in the temple, other times it will be prayerful retreat to reset our compass, other times it will be engaging in a revolutionary Palm Sunday parade, other times it will be faithful witness to one wrongly accused and wrongly punished. Still other times, it will be realizing that none of us gets this right all of the time, and so along the way we’ll need a little grace. In true Jesus fashion, we will also find grace for others who miss the mark.

Unbelievably, there is an annotated Jewish New Testament. I find the commentary most interesting. The authors tell us that Jesus’ use of salt in our passage this morning was purposeful as he wanted to use something all would understand as representing purity and wisdom. To be salt of the world, we must be wise. In another passage, Jesus reminds to be as wise as serpents, but as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). Further, the commentators remind us that for Jesus, faith must be accompanied by action.

That is what Isaiah was saying in the first place. Our faith and our worship are not performances designed to dazzle God with our creativity unless or until that worship service arises from faithful action based in love. It really doesn't matter what music we use, or how much liturgy, or whether we dance, or whether we worship in quiet – or all of the above. What does matter is what our worship empowers in each of us. Does our worship lead us to reflection, and subsequently to action? What is the most loving thing to do? What is mine to do? Father Mulcahy, in the popular television series M*A*S*H put it this way, "God didn't put us here for that pat on the back. He created us so he could be here himself. So he could exist in the lives of those he created, in his image."

I know I date myself with that quote, but it is part of perhaps the best sermon I've ever heard. It's a reminder that we so often focus on the wrong things when it is within us to do the right things. Isaiah's challenge to our piety is followed up by Jesus reminding us of who we really are. Both call all of us –within and outside the faith community—to a greater righteousness. A righteousness that comes from God and over-rides our petty self-interest. We are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. May we live like it more and more every day.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.