

***NOT SO FAST!***  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Isaiah 58: 2-12 (NRSV)**

**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 our 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 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.**

I have been attending church for just about as long as I can remember. We went to Sunday school at 10:00 and then to worship services at 11:00. We returned in the evening for that service. When I entered junior high school I rode my bicycle to Methodist Youth Fellowship that met an hour or so before the Sunday evening service.

My Boy Scout troop met at the church on Monday evenings. My troop mowed the expansive church lawn every other Saturday. And I bicycled back to the church on Wednesday nights for the youth choir practice. I have been a parish minister for 35 years. The pattern of my week has not changed very much except that I do not mow the lawn or attend scout meetings. I do attend a lot of meetings with staff and lay leaders. My weekends are often crowded with weddings and or memorial services.

The general assumption that I carried through these many decades was that Sunday services were meant to inspire the congregation who, in turn, would leave the church to serve the world. I believed that if the sermon was convincing and the music program was awesome people would be transformed and do the work of God throughout the week. They would return the next Sunday morning to get “recharged.” The whole concept of Holy Communion was that we broke the bread in remembrance of Christ, and by this liturgy we would be reminded to go into all the world sharing God’s love for others. The mystery of the Paschal Lamb charged our purpose of giving our lives to a broken world.

I think there are a lot of people who share these assumptions. They come to church expecting to be inspired and invigorated. They want the music to soothe their souls, or revive their fainting hearts, or flood their minds with triumphant expectation. Folks expect the sermon to confirm their basic goodness. When you ask people what they want in a sermon, they will say almost universally, “intellectually stimulating and inspiring.” A little humor goes a long way also.

So you can imagine my surprise this week when I read this passage from the book of Isaiah and realized that we have got it all wrong! In fact, we have the whole

meaning of worship and ritual inside out, upside down, and totally misunderstood. Now don't feel foolish. This confusion is at least as old as Trito-Isaiah, that is, the third and latter author of the book of Isaiah from which I read. This author is thought to have lived about 2,600 years ago. In other words we have had it wrong for well over two millennia.

Let me say a brief word about the structure of this chapter. It begins with the question of ritual and it's effectiveness, what God really seeks from the community of faith, and concludes with the deeper meaning of Sabbath.

The opening complaint is that the people are expecting more results from their temple and their God. They are curious about God, they would like to know about God but they are not getting satisfactory answers. You can imagine the complaints that had been pouring into the pastor-parish relations committee. It would probably go something like this:

“We have been members of this congregation for six generations. Our great grandparents built this sanctuary. Our grandparents erected the Sunday school wing, and our parents helped build a new parsonage. And what have we got in return? We are no closer to knowing the ways of God. We are not sure what God has done for us lately.

We have paid our pledge every year and contributed to the benevolence fund. When the minister declared that we needed an associate pastor we increased our pledge. And what did we get? A bright young woman fresh out of seminary wants to change everything, cannot relate to the older members, and has brought dance and drums into the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. Admittedly new families are beginning

to attend but they are not contributing financially at the same level as our long time members. And to make matters worse, some kid spilled a pot of glue on the carpet in Fellowship Hall.

Even the senior minister came to the pulpit last Sunday and read a long passage from Bill Easum's book, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*. After all the sacrifices that we have made to this church we deserve more. We are no closer to God, our prayers are not answered, and the world is just as messed up as it ever has been."

On a serious note, I think that most of us often wonder where God is. Our faith or active church membership has not made us immune from moral lapses, family calamity, disease, or accident. From our daily schedules to world events it seems that life is far more complicated and moral choices are deeply compromised from the outset. The only fad greater than diets is the chase after spiritual fulfillment as one retreat, guru, book, chant or ritual after another collapses in our souls as ash from a cold charcoal ember. None of this has brought peace to our hearts.

From time immemorial we have thought that if we could make the right sacrifice, chant the prayers more artfully, or play out the ritual with greater authenticity we would grow close to God. Or, we imagined that God would at least acknowledge us, tip his hat, or offer a salute. Isaiah declared that when we use our religion for self-gratification, or self-affirmation, or self-justification, or as a means of social influence we are deeply severed from the Source of profound wholeness. It all backfires! The more exaggerated forms of ritual only deepen the rift between God and humanity. Sackcloth, ashes, flagellation, and extreme self-denial are only symptoms

of spiritual anorexia. But so also are fundamentalism, literalism, and judgmental-shameful moralism.

Isaiah declared, “NOT SO FAST!” It does not work that way. There are some mistaken assumptions of what God wants from us. God has never wanted these forms of religiosity or ritual from God’s people. What God wants is just working conditions, shelter for the homeless, bread for the hungry, and freedom for every human being. That is the sacrifice that is pleasing to God. It is God’s will that our jurisprudence treats everyone equally before the law, malignant gossip cease, and people are treated with dignity. The gift that God desires is clothing for the naked and open friendship with all of God’s people. We ought to be in kinship with everyone. This is the kind of fast that is pleasing to God.

Then Isaiah announced the most remarkable thing I can think of. When the conditions of justice are met, God grants harmony to the community. There will be healing. The broken ones will be restored. Parched gardens will be watered and fruits, vegetables, trees, and flowers will prosper. The deserts of the human soul will be quenched with the springs of trust and hope. When we create the conditions of just and righteous relationships our children will be grounded in the values that guide and shape the prosperity of their future. The foundations of the morrow are laid in the virtues of character and equity for every human being.

Isaiah closes the chapter with the this statement:

“If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of

the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestors, Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (58: 13-14)

The Sabbath, the day of rest and celebration, follows the week of compassion. We enter the sanctuary with the gifts of kindness and service. We set upon the altar the time we volunteered at the Food Bank; the check we wrote to the Breakthrough Club; the Cub Scout meeting where we helped the kids earn a cooking badge; the long telephone call we had with a grandchild where we mostly listened to her broken heart; and the note we sent to a recent widow. We lift up prayers of thanksgiving because we had the privilege to serve and in that ministry we discovered that God was with us all the time. We sing songs of joy because our lives have been dedicated to some holy purpose found in the most ordinary needs of life.

One of the people I very much admire is Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children’s Defense Fund. In 2001 she delivered the commencement address at Tulane University and wrote a poem entitled, “I Care and I Am Willing to Serve.”

“Lord I cannot preach like Martin Luther King, Jr.  
or turn a poetic phrase like Maya Angelou  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

I do not have Fred Shuttlesworth's and Harriet  
Tubman's courage or Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's political skills  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

I cannot sing like Fannie Lou Hamer  
or organize like Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

I am not holy like Archbishop Tutu,  
forgiving like Mandela, or disciplined like Gandhi  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

I am not brilliant like Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois or  
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or as eloquent as

Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

I have not Mother Teresa's saintliness,  
 Dorothy Day's love or Cesar Chavez's  
 gentle tough spirit  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

God it is not as easy as it used to be  
 to frame an issue and forge a solution  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

My mind and body are not so swift as in youth  
 and my energy comes in spurts  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

I'm so young  
 nobody will listen  
 I'm not sure what to say or do  
*but I care and am willing to serve.*

I can't see or hear well  
 speak good English, stutter sometimes, am afraid of criticism  
 and get real scared standing up before others  
*but I care and am willing to serve.”<sup>1</sup>*

Isaiah asserts that when we care and when we serve we enter the gates with thanksgiving, the song of praise on our lips. We go to church on Sunday because we have reveled in a week of tender kindness. There is no greater feeling than the peace of knowing that we have helped someone. We want to say, “Thank you, God,” for the privilege of mercy. Charity always makes us sing. It makes us women and men not only of character but also of destiny.

The story is told of a bitter, cold evening in northern Virginia a long time ago. The old man’s beard was glazed by winter’s frost while he waited for a ride across the

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<sup>1</sup> Marian Wright Edelman, “I Care and Am Willing to Serve,” from her commencement address at Tulane University, 2001.

river. The wait seemed endless. His body became numb and stiff from the frigid north wind.

He heard the faint, steady rhythm of approaching hooves along the frozen path. Anxiously, he watched as several horsemen rounded the bend. He let the first one pass by without an effort to get his attention. Then another rider passed by, and another. Finally, the last rider neared the spot where the old man sat like a snow statue. As this one drew near, the old man caught the rider's eye and shouted, "Sir, would you mind giving an old man a ride to the other side? There doesn't appear to be a passageway by foot. I don't think I could stand up against the current."

Reining his horse, the rider replied, "Sure thing. Climb on up." But seeing the old man was unable to lift this half-frozen body from the ground, the horseman dismounted and helped the old man onto the horse. The horseman took the old man not just across the river, but to his destination, which was a few miles away.

As they neared the man's tiny but cozy cottage, the horseman's curiosity caused him to inquire, "Sir, I noticed that you let several other riders pass by without making an effort to secure a ride. When I came along you immediately asked me for a ride. I'm curious why, on such a bitter winter night, you would wait and ask the last rider. What if I had refused and left you there?"

The old man lowered himself slowly down from the horse. He looked the rider straight in the eye and replied, "I've been around these parts for some time. I reckon I know people pretty good. I looked into the eyes of the other riders and saw immediately there was no concern for my situation. It would have been useless even to ask them for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes, kindness and compassion were



evident. I knew then and there that your gentle spirit would welcome the opportunity to give me assistance in my time of need.”

The horseman was touched deeply by the heartwarming comments of the old man. “I am most grateful for what you have said,” he replied to the old man. “May I never get too busy in my own affairs that I fail to respond to the needs of others with kindness and compassion.”

With that, Thomas Jefferson turned his horse around and made his way back to the capitol.<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah would say that is something to shout about. That’s a reason to go to church.

***Finis***

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<sup>2</sup> The author and source of this story is unknown. It was taken from “Afterhours Inspirational Stories,” at [www.inspirationalstories.com/8/811.html](http://www.inspirationalstories.com/8/811.html).