

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 9, 2020
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Isaiah 58:5-9a Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
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[a] 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.

"Worship from the Heart"

On his way home from work Tom heard a commercial on the radio reminding husbands not to forget Valentine's Day. When he got home he went online to make sure he had something. But when he handed Shelley the bouquet of flowers and stuffed teddy bear, she said thank you in the most flat, emotionless voice possible. She had been dropping hints for weeks, but Tom hadn't been paying attention. So he had no idea that she was looking forward to spending time working on a project at home together instead of buying each other gifts. He had done just enough to make sure he let his wife know he hadn't forgotten. Joan called up her husband's favorite steakhouse to make reservations on February 14th like they always did. When she came home from work she handed Gary a card and told him to get his coat so they could go out for dinner. That's when Gary brought her into the kitchen. Spread out on the counter was a cowboy gourmet dinner specially prepared for her. Gary had done lots of research. Looked around on those recipe websites to come up with a meaningful menu, all the foods Joan loved but never had the energy to make herself. He even called Joan's sister to find out which romantic comedy she would most enjoy watching together under a cozy blanket on their own couch in their own living room.

We can tell when gifts come from the heart. We can also spot a superficial gift, something that merely fulfills a requirement, something done because you're supposed to do it or you will get in trouble. God can tell too. God wants true and genuine worship from his people. And not just the kind of worship at set times and prescribed locations. It all starts with what God gives us. God gives us the gifts we really need, the blessings that come straight from his heart to give us truly meaningful lives filled with purpose and direction. God changes our hearts by his grace. And then God causes true worship to overflow from our hearts into the lives of others.

This section of Isaiah begins with a challenge from God. God scolds his people: **"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?"** (Isaiah 58:5) God had given his people religious festivals and outlines ways they should act on those special days. Isaiah continues: **"Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"** (Isaiah 58:5) God's people had been doing the things they thought were important. But it was all just going through the motions.

In the week before the Super Bowl, I heard an interview with Kyle Rudolph a player for the Minnesota Vikings. This year he committed to intermittent fasting, eating only during an eight hour window, to start getting in shape for next season. Medical experts debate whether fasting puts less stress on the digestive system or just cuts down on calories. Today fasting, going without food for extended periods of time, sounds exotic. But in the Old Testament, it was common, a practice designed by God to prepare his people to focus the mind, body, and soul on worship and prayer, to sharpen their attention on the purpose behind those religious festivals.

But it easily turned into a ritual in which they lost track of the purpose. They started to focus only on what they had to do, what God required from them. And then doing the bare minimum of what God expected from them turned into what they expected God to do for them once he noticed everything they gave up for him. So God rebukes his people for a faulty fast. They were so focused on themselves and trying to measure up to God's demands, that it resulted in just going through the motions and waiting for God to express his approval. It wasn't worship from the heart.

God expected something real from his people: **"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?"** (Isaiah 58:6) If we touch the lives of our own family or close friends, isn't that the best we can hope to do with this brief time we are on this earth? God makes his expectations more concrete through the Prophet Isaiah: **"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?"** (Isaiah 58:7) It is challenging enough to help the people in my immediate circle of influence. I just need to focus on myself and the challenges I face. So many people are abusing generosity of others. They don't really deserve help.

So many times our acts of mercy and compassion toward victims of injustice and oppression amounts to handing out store bought Valentine's Day cards to everyone in the entire third grade. Paying attention to the hungry and homeless is like inviting everyone in your classroom to your birthday party because your mom doesn't want anyone to feel left out even though they're not all your friends. Fear creeps in. We feel like the fifteen year old boy afraid to ask out the cute girl because he just got dumped. We feel like an employee who will settle for doing the bare minimum because the boss never acknowledges our extra effort. We act like a disgruntled husband stubbornly looking out for his own needs because his wife doesn't seem to pay any attention to him. Reluctance betrays our sense of vulnerability.

Worship that does more than the bare minimum of obedience is challenging. Worship from the heart that doesn't just go through the motions is what we need. That's exactly what we get when we look to Jesus. In Matthew chapter five Jesus tells his disciples: **"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."** (Matthew 5:17,18) Jesus carried out true worship. It wasn't just a superficial kind of love that meant going through the motions. Jesus was tempted in the most extreme ways, yet never looked out for himself (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus was obedient all the way to the point of death and then carried through with it. (Isaiah 53:8,9) Jesus was focused on the sick and oppressed, the captives to physical disabilities and emotional distress. Because Jesus saw a deeper need behind all those symptoms. What those souls needed, what every soul still needs, is to be set free from the prison of sinful selfishness. Jesus understood his life and death was the only adequate key to take off the shackles of human souls never being able to accomplish perfect obedience for our God. His life of worship brings true freedom to our hearts.

So what does worship from the heart look like? Start with a fast as Isaiah recommends. The way God teaches it in Isaiah chapter 58, it isn't only about going without food. It's about sharpening your mind so you can experience God to the fullest extent. Hearts rescued by Jesus notice people. We see people who are experiencing modern yokes. People who suffer from addiction. People suffering from doubt and insecurity. People fighting uphill battles in life because of racial repression, sexual or economic oppression. People who are made to feel less than human, treated as sub-human. Isaiah tells us to see them. And seeing them understand the opportunities God is giving us to bring the redemption and restoration only possible through Jesus Christ. Fasting is a good picture for worship that comes from the heart. Because when we focus on the what we can do, it reflects what has happened to us on the inside. But what we do also impacts our own hearts.

Here's what I mean. In the weeks leading up to the Super Bowl, people were cheering for Andy Reid, the head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs to get the championship. But in an interview with Brett Veach, the general manager of the Chiefs, he said the irony is that Andy was working extra hard to get the Super Bowl for all the people around him. Or take Hustle Kindness as an example. I don't know all the people behind the store and the brand very well. But I know they started out doing something kind for children who had difficult

medical conditions. Then it spread. People wanted to be associated with that motto. And it works changes. It starts with the heart. The heart shows itself in action. Actions reinforce that attitude in our own hearts and impacts other people.

Think about how Jesus lived with a focus on other people. Tax collectors like Zacchaeus. The Samaritan woman with five ex-husbands and a live-in boyfriend (John 4). A woman caught in adultery (John 8). Jesus sought out the shunned and marginalized. And he did it without a hidden agenda. It was an agenda, but it was obvious and transparent that he actually cared about these people. His desire was to turn them away from their sinful lifestyles and into a new freedom in his forgiveness.

Today our world today is unfriendly toward Christianity, but needs genuine Christianity more than ever. People notice when someone sacrifices themselves for the good of others. People appreciate sorting through spiritual questions honestly. People long for an authentic community with people they can trust. People are looking for truth. That is exactly what genuine Christianity offers in worship from the heart. But to get to those issues, God's people simply need to see people, get to know them, enjoy them, and show genuine concern. That happens when we take what happens here on a Sunday inside the church and put it to use outside of church into our daily lives. Healing happens inside when we take the heart of Jesus and put it into action in our community.

Then God promises the results. Isaiah tells us the results of worship from the heart: **"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."** (Isaiah 58:8) Isaiah promises that the light inside you will shine out, the righteousness you have been given as a gift from Christ through faith goes before you. Jesus says you are salt. You are light. (Matthew 5:13,14) Isaiah tells us God himself is at work: **"Here am I."** (Isaiah 58:9) God responds with the eagerness of a faithful servant ready for duty. God is active and blessing the work we do as we take his word into our lives.

God's biggest concern isn't what you eat or how often. Rather it is what is going on in your heart. Freed by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, your heart has been freed live out true and genuine worship to your Savior. And nothing pleases your God more than when you start seeing people, when you realize opportunities to address the hurts people are going through, and when you respond with the redemption and restoration only possible through Jesus Christ. That's worship for God in our daily lives. That's concern and compassion that comes from the heart. And those demonstrations of love are always the just right gifts back to a God who loved us and gave up his Son for us. Amen.