

"Intermittent Fasting"
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
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5 February 2023
Isaiah 58:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

Isaiah 58

¹Shout 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. ²Yet 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.

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, 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. ⁵Is 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? ⁶Is 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? ⁷Is 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?

⁸Then 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. ⁹Then

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 of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰if 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. ¹¹The 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. ¹²Your 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.

Matthew 5

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your

righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

I. Introduction

My mother, God rest her soul, passed away in August of 1994, about 5 months before her grandson Tyler was born. I remember her for a lot of things. She was born to parents in Hawaii who were quite wealthy in the years before Hawaii became our 50th state; she trained to be a registered nurse, but gave up that career when my older brother Steven was born in 1956. She was a mother to five sons, and I remember hearing a long time ago that the reason she had five boys was her hope that one of them would have been a daughter, a hope that obviously did not turn out the way she wanted it to; and she was a closet alcoholic. I was young and naive back in the day, so when I saw open and partially consumed bottles of alcohol in our basement cabinets, I didn't know what it meant, and it wasn't until much later that I understood my mom's situation.

But the one thing she said to me that I have never forgotten happened during my freshman year at Wheaton. I developed a situation with my right shin that required surgery, and so I finished the Fall quarter and went home for the Winter so that my surgery could happen at the University of Rochester where my father was on the medical faculty. And when I walked in the door of my house around Thanksgiving of 1977, the first thing my mother told me was, "Boy have you gotten fat!" To be sure, I was a kind of skinny kid when I graduated from high school - if my memory is right, I was 6'4" tall and weighed 175 pounds. But even gaining some 10-15 pounds during my Freshman Fall Quarter at Wheaton didn't make me think that I was fat until my mom made that comment to me. I think that my mother's comment almost 40 years ago has been the reason why I have been so irrationally self conscious about my weight, and

why I have wasted so much emotional energy in my twenties and my thirties trying to get back down to the weight I was when I graduated from high school. To be sure, I know that it was unrealistic of me to want that. And even though I know how irrational and unrealistic that was of me in my head, every once in a while when I come out of the shower and I see myself in the mirror, my mom's words still echo in my brain, and I experience a moment of sadness and depression that I am not living up to my mother's standards for my appearance.

And of course, I am not alone in this. Weight loss and weight management is a multi-gazillion dollar industry in America, one aided and abetted by the hyping and hyper-sexualizing of a certain kind of body that is deemed to be sexy and attractive. And one of the tools that people sometimes use to help them lose weight is called "intermittent fasting." Intermittent fasting is the idea that if one restricts the times in which one consumes food, it can help the body burn fat more efficiently. There are two common ways that intermittent fasting is organized. One is called the 5-2 plan and it means that one eats 5 days a week and fasts for 2 days a week. The second allows one to eat every day but only for a restricted period of time, say from noon to 6 pm, or from 5pm to 11pm, or something like that. Not being a medical doctor, I have no idea if these plans actually work. But not being a social recluse, I also know that people have touted intermittent fasting as a safe and effective way to lose weight.

IIA. Pivot to Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah also speaks this morning to fasting, but in a decidedly different way. Isaiah 58 is generally thought to be addressed to the children of Israel following their release from the Babylonian exile and their return to their home land of Judah, often viewed in Scripture as a second exodus, comparable to the exodus from Egypt. Hence, the issues facing

the children of Israel were no longer tied to when and whether God would rescue them from the clutches of the Babylonians; now the issues facing the children of Israel had to do with their rebuilding of their society and their lives back in Judah. That rebuilding isn't going well, and the children of Israel want to know why.

(**slide2**) And the prophet is happy to oblige. He begins in verse 1 by declaring the reality of the situation, a reality that the Hebrews for sure won't accept: "Announce to my people their **rebellion** (פְּשָׁעָם), to the house of Jacob their **sins** (חַטָּאתָם)." That reality continues in verse 2, where the prophet proclaims, "Yet day after day they seek me (אֲחֹרָי; Ogden and Sterk, UBS Handbook 1629, Oswalt NICOT 495, and Paul ECC 482 all rightly note that the Hebrew word order places the emphasis on who is being sought - God - as opposed to the act of seeking or the subject doing the seeking) and delight to know my ways, **as if they were** (כִּי־אִנִּי; see, e.g., Sterk and Ogden UBS Handbook 1629 ["This expression implies that they do not understand or accept that they need to live out their religious commitment in other aspects of daily life, so they fail to please God"]; so similarly Goldingay new ICC 165 ["But either people go through the motions of enthusing over Yhwh's expectations of them but actually do not implement them, or they look for Yhwh to behave toward them with *mišpāṭ ūšedāqā* but do not embody these characteristics in their own life"], Childs OTL 477 ["The people who initially appear to pursue the way of true faith fail because their actions lack the elements concomitant with proper ritual, namely, the doing of righteousness (56:1) and obeying the ordinances of God. They only act 'as if' they were such a people"], Oswalt NICOT 496 ["They look much like a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the justice of its God. But like is the key word. To be like such a nation and to be such a nation are not the same thing, and as the succeeding verses show, they are not such a nation"]) a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God." These two verses go hand in hand. The people's facade is laid out in verse 2 with the words **as if they were**, which implies that while they might claim to be "a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God," they really weren't. And because their religiosity is merely a facade, they are declared by God to be rebellious and sinful in verse 1.

(slide3) Except that's a rather harsh judgment coming from the God who just saved them from Babylon in a new exodus, so understandably and predictably, the children of Israel take issue with God in verse 3: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why [do we] humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Why do the Hebrews specifically mention fasting instead of, say, sacrificing the way that Micah did last week? Probably because fasting and mourning are reflective of the desperate times and the desperate situation the Hebrews found themselves in. Professor Joseph Blenkinsopp, formerly of the University of Notre Dame, reminds us that "Fasting and mourning as a response to extreme crises were distinctive features of religious life in the post-disaster period" (AB 178; see also his excursus on fasting on pages 182-84). The children of Israel are doing what we are all prone to do: protesting our innocence and blaming someone else - in this case, God - when things aren't going the way we want them to! And surprisingly, God does not take issue with their claim. God does not say, "Why are you lying to me? You don't fast and you don't humble yourselves. For heaven's sake, at least be honest with me!" There isn't anything like that in the text.

(slide4) Instead, God takes issue with the fact that the children of Israel are hiding behind their religious facade and at the same time are acting in ways that are contrary to God's will and priorities. We get the lowdown on that in verses 3b-4: "You serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress (תַּגְזֹּשׁוּ) all your workers. Look (הִנֵּה), you fast only to quarrel and to fight (לְרִיב וּמִצָּה) and to strike with a wicked fist (בְּצִגְרֶיךָ רָשָׁע). Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high." Just like we saw in Micah 6, Isaiah isn't saying that fasting is bad in and of itself. Isaiah is saying that fasting is *irrelevant* when it hides sinful behavior like oppressing one's workers, quarreling and fighting, and striking someone else with a wicked fist.

It isn't that the devotional act of fasting is a bad thing. The bad thing is the *hypocrisy* of thinking that doing a religious act like fasting counterbalances our own human selfishness, our oppression of others, our quarrels, fights, and altercations with other people.

(slide5) And just like Micah did, Isaiah now provide the necessary corrective to the children of Israel in verses 6-7: "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 to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin (מִבְּשָׂרְךָ, literally "from your own flesh," probably meaning one's own family [so Ogden and Sterk, UBS Handbook 1637 and Paul ECC 488 ("If your kith and kin are in need, you are obliged to lend them a helping hand as well")]. Goldingay, new ICC 175, thinks that this word has the broader reference to a fellow Hebrew ["it mean they belong to your people"], as does Childs OTL 478 ["the poor within the nation"], while Blenkinsopp AB 179 reads it as referring to fellow human beings ["not hide oneself from one's own flesh and blood, that is, one's fellow human beings"], as does Oswealt NICOT 504 ["the phrase can also refer to people in general ... and it seems that the more general reference might be more appropriate here"])?". Each one of those eight (!) corrective examples would make its own sermon, and I obviously don't have time enough to do that now. Were I ever to preach such a sermon, I might remind you that Jesus echoes some of these same concerns in two different places in the New Testament: First in Luke 4, when he says "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... to let the oppressed go free" (vv 18, beginning and end), and then again in the parable of the sheep and the goats, when he mentions that "I was hungry and you gave me food ..., I was naked and you gave me clothing" (Matt 25:35, 36). And I might also remind you that all throughout the Hebrew Bible, there are regular and ongoing prophetic warnings about injustice and oppression as issues that greatly trouble God. Indeed, if you take the time to read Isaiah 1:10-20 this afternoon, you will find a lot of correspondence with this morning's passage from Isaiah 58.

(slide6) But that's a sermon for another time. This morning, I simply want to continue on with the Isaiah passage because in verses 8-9a, God tells the Hebrews what the consequences of aligning themselves with God's priorities will be: "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 cry for help, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am (הִנְנִי, a common *human* response to God's call, is used of God responding to a human plea, prayer, or cry only here in the Hebrew Bible)'." Note the positive language that is used here: your light, your healing, your vindicator; the glory of the LORD, who will answer your cry for help. Sounds to me that God is giving the children of Israel a pretty clear and a pretty easy choice: If you continue with your religious facade, then God will not listen to you; but if you align your behavior with God's priorities, then you will get all your needs met.

(slide7) And just to make doubly sure that the Hebrews get the point, Isaiah returns in verses 9b-10a with the positive behavior that God expects from his people: "***If*** you remove (אַם־תִּטֹּר) the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted." And ***IF*** that happens, and once that happens, good things will follow according to verses 10b-11: "***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." I know that if I had to choose between a future that looks like verses 9-11 and a present that is so desperate that it drives me to fasting in order to get God's attention, I'll choose that future every day and twice on Sunday.

IIB. Pivot to Matthew

Which leads me to our passage from Matthew 5, the section that follows the beatitudes that we glanced at last week. Here, the tone and the subject of the Sermon changes. No longer is Jesus telling his disciples about how blessed they are for being peacemakers and so on. Now, Jesus is telling his disciples what he expects them to be in the world. In that sense, verses 13-16 lay out the consequences for being all the things Jesus wants his followers to be in the here and now. It isn't *only* for the great heavenly reward that waits for us in the next life. There is *also* a responsibility for Jesus' believers in this life.

(slide8) In particular, he calls us "the salt of the earth," "the light of the world," and "a city set upon a hill." Each of these calls us to a different role in the world at large. Today, we use salt for flavor and as a preservative, and the same was true in ancient times. But more importantly, Jesus adds this weird little statement, "if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot" (verse 13b). That's among the more puzzling statements in the New Testament because we know, scientifically, that sodium chloride is a stable chemical compound that cannot lose its taste (ZIBBC has a nice summary of the different ways that this saying can be, and has been, interpreted). But what isn't puzzling is Jesus' assertion that salt that loses its taste is "no longer good for anything." It follows that if we are the salt of the earth and we lose our taste, then we are "no longer good for anything" either (so the online NET study Bible: "With this illustration Jesus warned about a disciple who ceased to follow him"). In other words, the statement about salt isn't a chemistry lesson; it is a statement of Jesus' expectation that we who are the salt of the earth will never lose our saltiness, never lose our Christian character, never lose our positive effect on the world around us.

That metaphor gets underscored by the next two metaphors. We are the light of the world. How does that work? In ancient times, homes were built in a very simple fashion: they had four walls and a ceiling. They weren't subdivided into a kitchen, a living room, a dining room, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a basement. They had four walls and a ceiling and thus effectively were one single room. Imagine that it's pitch black at midnight and then someone lights an oil lamp in the house. That light would spread to all the corners of the home, and as more oil lamps are lit, more light makes its way into the home. In the same way, we are the light of the world, and it is our responsibility to bring that light, to shine that light by being light, to all the corners of the world. And just as many oil lamps bring more light into a home, the many followers of Jesus are expected to bring more light into the world. We are also a city set on a hill. That means that we are highly visible to everyone who looks at us. Combined with the metaphor of light, it means that there is a highly public and highly visible aspect to our faith and to our faithfulness. Americans have historically wanted to keep religion confined to the privacy of our homes. We read our Bibles in private devotion, we pray in a closet, we go to church on Sunday but we don't typically preach on street corners. The emphasis in these verses is different. There is and there must be a public, visible side to our faith. Not for our own celebrity and glory; Jesus will speak to misguided and hypocritical public displays of religious devotion in chapter 6. But as Christians we are to have an effect on the world, a positive effect on the people around us, on the world in which we live, just like salt has an effect on the foods that it flavors and preserves. As the light of the world, our good works are to be visible to others so that God can be glorified by those around us. As a city set on a hill, we have to be highly conscious and highly aware of our public and visible testimony - whether spoken or

acted - and what that public and visible testimony communicates about the Messiah we claim to follow and the God we claim to obey. And as a city set on a hill, we have to accept that our public testimony is meant to be visible to everyone who sees us, for better - if it brings glory to God - or for worse - if it gives a sinful and unrepentant world yet another reason to doubt the gospel that we preach. As the Catholic Study Bible puts it, "By their deeds the disciples are to influence the world for good. They can no more escape notice than a city set on a mountain. If they fail in good works, they are as useless as flavorless salt or as a lamp whose light is concealed."

III. Pivot to today

I trust that the message from this morning's Scripture readings isn't too difficult to see. Both Micah 6 and Isaiah 58 are focussed on what the truest and highest priorities of a faithful life must involve. For Micah, it was doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. For Isaiah, it is loosening the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, and breaking every yoke. It is sharing our bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into our homes, clothing the naked, and being present for our own kin. Read in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, these kinds of activities are to be characteristic of those who seek God's favor, those who follow Jesus as Lord, and those who pledge allegiance to the Kingdom of God.

I can't think of a better way to end this morning sermon than by reading a paragraph from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 18. "If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right— ⁶if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, ~~does not~~ ~~defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period,~~ ⁷does not oppress

anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ⁸does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, ⁹follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord God." (Ezek 18:5-9).

May we live our daily lives as those who are righteous and who shall surely live, according to the words and the promises of Micah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus. Hallelujah! And amen.