

Rev. George Miller
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Acts 8:26-39

Today we heard about Isaiah 58, an organization that doesn't just point to a road and talk about it, they *walk* down that road, serving people with dignity, be it advocating, educating, or connecting.

They are like the early Church, where you could imagine Nicolaus the Proselyte ministering alongside the mother of Jesus.

They get their name from Isaiah 58:9b-12. "If you remove 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, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday... 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 on."

If you stop pointing fingers and speaking evil, if you offer food and address needs, then you will experience a renaissance, create a legacy, and build bridges.

How beautiful. How cool. How simple.

In many ways, the words of Isaiah 58 is the best example of the Prosperity Gospel- If you live this way, you'll experience a blessedness.

People often balk at the idea of the Prosperity Gospel, at money-hungry preachers who use faith to gather wealth, telling folk that if they just believe in God and follow Jesus the *right* way, they'll be rich rich rich.

Woe to false prophets who lead the vulnerable astray.

BUT...but for those who are without, for those living during times of tribulation, the idea of God blessing you is like a song of hope or a balm of Gilead.

Think of someone making minimal wage, or someone on the corner of Big Bend and Berry who hears that God's desire is to see their light rise and the windows of heaven to pour out blessings.

It can give them hope, inspire them to press on, not give up.

In my opinion, the Prosperity Gospel is how to live the best way possible, as if Heaven is here, now, and our faith is a path to making that true.

While working on today's message, I looked out at the lawn, with birds at the birdfeeder.

Having a birdfeeder has always felt like "home" to me. My siblings and I were raised with a feeder in the backyard.

Dad built the feeder. He placed bricks on the ground to capture the shells, making it easier to sweep up and keep clean.

Mom kept the feeder filled all day with seeds that were held in an old milk box right next to the sliding glass door.

It's been 18 years since last seeing that view, but thanks to generous gift-certificates from Council when I came here, I have 2 feeders.

Every day, before making the coffee, I get to step outside, be it rain, snow, hail, or mosquitoes, and place a generous portion of seed into the feeders.

By the time the cats are fed and coffee done, the yard is alive with song and birds of so many colors, from American Goldfinch to Eastern Bluebird, Carolina Chickadee to Indigo Bunting, from the Red Bellied Woodpecker to Momma and Papa Cardinal.

I *get* to enjoy that. My cats get to watch; my neighbors see it.

Being able to Feed the Birds is one of life's biggest blessings.

It's also a ministry- caring for Creation, providing for God's Creatures, and bringing beauty to the block.

The front yard is a living form of the Prosperity Gospel; by giving, sharing, I am blessed-
blessed by the birds' songs, blessed by how their beautiful colors light up the lawn.

Isaiah 58 says that if we let go of infighting, if we reach out and share, then we will shine, the past is honored, the future assured, and we become known as restorers.

Sounds like the right kind of prosperity to aim for.

This reminds me of Luke 13:18-19 when Jesus says the Kingdom of God "is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in the branches."

God's Kingdom is like a tree that grew in a garden, with birds nesting in the branches.

Not just one kind of bird, not the approved kind of bird, not one bird at the exclusion of others, but the birds of the air.

The American Goldfinch and Eastern Bluebird, the Carolina Chickadee and Indigo Bunting, the Red Bellied Woodpecker and Ma and Pa Cardinal.

Remove the yoke, stop hurtful gossip. Offer, supply, walk beside. There will be restoration, and there will be birds, birds of all kinds.

We see that in the Ministry of Jesus, we witness this in the first churches.

In the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, we encounter people who weren't normally welcome. We got to see them invited to the table and to play their own part.

Mary Magdalene and Joanna. Zacheus and the 4 daughters of Philip who could prophecy (Acts 21:8-9).

Nicolaus the Prostyle and the Eunuch from Ethiopia who not only looked different but had a completely different body.

We witness how the Kingdom that Jesus spoke of (and died for), and the world that God wills, is one where-

so many birds of the air get to find rest in the branches, knowing they belong, scattering seeds and singing their song.

It is not about perfection or rushing along, it's not about following the most traveled road or speaking to the most popular folk.

It's about solidarity, compassion, and grace.

It's about hearing the call to be present and to care. It's about finding gladness when you do.

It's about how participation in God's will for the world empowers us to experience blessings we never even thought of.

Not necessarily of silver and gold, but beauty and light, song and special ways.

For that, let us say Amen.