

Isaiah 58:1-12 Pastor Bill Uetricht 5 Epiphany 2/09/20

Lately we've been having some very good conversations at our Wednesday night class on male spirituality—a class designed simply for men. A question that I have frequently posed to the group is, “How do we as men figure out a way to welcome the voice of critique? How do we become strong enough to make room in our lives for the people who will challenge us, take us to new places? How do we develop even within ourselves the ability to stand outside of ourselves and see ourselves as others see us? How do we provide an ‘insider’s critique’ of ourselves? Obviously, this is not a conversation limited to men. It is a conversation that both men and women ought to have.

It is an “insider’s critique” that we receive today in the first reading from Isaiah. The prophet is speaking to his own people, a land that in years previous experienced some of its exiles coming home. The promises had been big for these exiles. But a devastated land and nation didn’t transform quickly. The ancient ruins remained ruins. And the prophet speaks to the nation saying that they have some responsibility for the mess.

God starts the conversation. He tells the prophet: “Shout out, do not hold back. Lift up your voice like a shofar, like a trumpet. Announce to my people their rebellion.” And that is what the prophet does. He, an insider, confronts his people with their sin.

In doing so, he has God getting a little sarcastic about their sins. Now I realize that sarcasm isn’t always the best tool. I often tell couples that sarcasm represents “unfair fighting.” But sometimes, sarcasm grasps people’s attention. “*Day after day* they seek me and delight to know my ways, *as if* they were a nation that practiced righteousness, or more accurately, justice. They want justice from me, but they don’t practice justice themselves.”

“They say things like this: ‘Why do you fast, but you do not see? Why do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’ Why do we go through all of this religious stuff we think you want, and you, O God, do not seem to pay attention to all of our religiosity?”

Fasting obviously is one of the major topics here. Evidently, after the people returned from exile, it was decided that there would be a seventy-year period of fasting. Twice a year, the nation would fast. This wouldn’t be a private, individual, giving-up-chocolate kind of fast. No, the whole nation would fast, seeking God’s face, searching for his ways.

Well, the fasting events were hollow, God seems to think. They missed the point. God says, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.”

In other words, you do all the nice religious things, fast from food, appear to be humble, but you treat people like . . . they don’t matter. You oppress people. You don’t pay them well. And you constantly fight with one another. You are constantly waving the finger at somebody else, blaming them for everything. You are missing the point.

“I don’t want your false humility,” God says, “pretending that you don’t matter. Oh, knock it off. You don’t need to be like a bunch of cattails, that close up their heads at night. I am not asking you to lie around in sackcloth and ashes.”

“Here is the fast that I want I want you to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo anything that keeps people bound, to let the oppressed go free. I want you to share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your home, to cover the naked, and even to respond to the people who live next door to you. Stop all the blaming. Stop the pointing of fingers. Pour yourself out to those in need. Don’t just throw food at them. Connect with them. Enter into relationship with them. Help satisfy the true needs of the afflicted.

Then the light is going to shine. Then the gloom will become like the noonday. Then *your* needs then will be satisfied. Then you will become like a watered garden. Then you will be able to rebuild the ancient ruins. Then you will then get a reputation for being the repairer of the breach, the ones that bring together the gaps that exist in buildings, roads, and other structures brought about by invading armies.

Insider critique! That is what Isaiah gives us today. And I suspect that is what Matthew is up to today in our gospel lesson. In his community, there must be a lot of wondering about people like Paul, who *seem* to be arguing that the ways of the past, the ways experienced in the ancient Jewish scriptures, the Torah, don't matter anymore.

While they are probably misreading Paul, they are worried that he is going too far. And so Matthew has Jesus reassure the insiders that Jesus isn't doing away with the past. The law still matters. Jesus is connected to it. In fact, he is a lot like Moses, which is why Matthew has him teaching today on a mountain. In many ways, like Moses, Jesus is bringing the law to the people. *But*, Matthew says, this law is not the same-old same old. There is something very new—something that actually requires a greater righteousness.

You are not being let off the hook, in other words. Actually, the expectations are larger than those of the ancient law. And next week, we will experience what those larger expectations look like. Much of what will be said next week—spoiler alert—is that it matters how we treat one another. The insider critique offered to the disciples of Jesus and ultimately to us is that the heart and soul of what it means to follow Jesus is to care for other people in a way that reveals the love of God given to you and to them. It isn't just about performance of

external duties. It will be about what flows from the inside of you to others.

Don't think you can treat people any way you like. Don't think that you can go around pointing fingers at others, blaming them all the time. Don't think that you can view them as objects, people without dignity. Don't think that your relationship with them is simply a matter of what you get out of that relationship. Don't think you can go around oppressing them, treating them as if they are less than you. We live in light of a greater righteousness, a righteousness that is rooted in the graciousness and mercy of God. They may go low, but we will go high.

More insider critique! Interestingly enough, though, this insider critique is given not only to shape those on the inside, but is given for the sake of the outside, the outsiders. Jesus says to his disciples today, "You are salt, and you are light—salt for the earth, light for the world." What he is teaching on the inside is for the sake of the world, is for the sake of the outside.

By the way, he doesn't tell his disciples or us that we will *become* the salt, or **become** the light. No, we *are* the salt and the light. That is just who we are. We bring flavor to the world. We bring light to dark places. Salt and light are not something we achieve. They are something we are.

You as people of God, you who are drenched in the waters of the Jesus' story, you who are the recipients of God's mercy and grace—you bring change to the world, to the outside.

You know when I hear that, when I say that, when I reflect on that, I find myself concluding: "Then maybe, just maybe, welcoming the prophets, embracing those who provide insider critique, seeking the mentors who can call me to a greater righteousness are oh so important. If I am salt and light, I want to live consistently with who I am. And let's face it. Sometimes I am not who I really am. Sometimes

I make a mess of things. Sometimes I don't treat people with the dignity that they deserve. I need the critique of the insider. Our nation needs the critique of the insiders. We aren't always who we really are. We need the prophets who challenge us to become who we really are. We need the critics, personally and corporately. And we if are disciples of Jesus, Richard Rohr says by "disciple" Jesus means adult—if we are adults, we will figure out how we are ourselves can offer critique to ourselves. We will say to ourselves, / will say to myself: "Look, Bill, you are being ridiculous. You are being self-centered. You are not treating people well. You are thinking that this is all about you."

Here's the bottom line, folks. You and I are incredibly loved. You and I have worth and dignity. They are gift to us. We are the beloved. We are the recipients of God's grace and compassion. We are salt and light. A little critique won't take that away. Nothing can take that away. So why would we want to stand defensively before the world, worrying that it can be? Doesn't make sense! Never say, "love me or leave me!" No, say "love me enough to help change me!"