February 12, 2017
Isaiah 58:1-12
What Breaks Your Heart?

Rev. Kerry Smith
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Isaiah 58:1-12 Common English Bible

Shout loudly; don’t hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their crime, to the house of Jacob their sins. They seek me day after day, desiring knowledge of my ways like a nation that acted righteously, that didn’t abandon their God. They ask me for righteous judgments, wanting to be close to God. “Why do we fast and you don’t see; why afflict ourselves and you don’t notice?” Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want, and oppress all your workers. You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast; you hit each other violently with your fists. You shouldn’t fast as you are doing today if you want to make your voice heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one’s head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Isn’t this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? Isn’t it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord’s glory will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, “I’m here.” If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon. The Lord will guide you continually and provide for you, even in parched places. He will rescue your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that won’t run dry. They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account; the foundations of generations past you will restore. You will be called Mender of Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets.

 Have you ever felt stuck? Felt like you are going through the motions of life? Doing the same thing day after day and you can’t remember the last time you felt joy or God’s peace? A few weeks ago I was visiting Natalie Boyle who was in the hospital for some testing. She was in the hospital, and yet her face glowed with joy as she shared with me a story about something that she had done. A few days before Christmas she had gotten an unexpected bonus from work. She said that she didn’t need the bonus, all of the family bills were paid and yes, a bonus would have been nice, but they didn’t need it. So, as she drove home with this bonus money in her purse, she felt herself being pulled to pull into an apartment building and stop. She didn’t fight this pulling, she followed it. She felt herself being drawn to knock on the first apartment door that she saw, and so she did. She didn’t talk herself out of it as being crazy, she followed the pulling that she felt. She knocked on the door and someone came to the door. She explained that she had this bonus money that she had received and that she felt drawn to give it to the person who lived in this apartment. The person who answered the door explained that they were struggling to pay their bill. There wasn’t enough money. Natalie gave this person the money and said that she hoped that it would help. The person said that it was a huge blessing to them.

 As Natalie shared this story with me, my mouth fell open and then further open. I wondered how I would have responded if I had felt that pulling? Would I have responded like Natalie did? There is so much pain in our world. There are so many things that we could do to make a difference. We often say here at Greenland Hills that we are called to be the hands and the feet of Jesus the Christ, but sometimes it feels so overwhelming. Where do we start? I was talking with a friend about how it seems like there is so much when I think about children who are hungry or youth who are juvenile detentions or adults who struggle with addiction or are in prison and feel alone.

I want us to think this morning about what breaks your heart. Do you feel a pull towards a certain group of people? Like refugees or the homeless or the incarcerated? A number of years ago I had a church member who was at the Dallas jail. I had never been to jail, so I called four different pastor friends about what the process was. None of them had been to jail. I remember thinking, doesn’t Jesus say that it our job in Matthew 25 to visit those in prison? So, I I called the chaplain’s office about what the process was to visit someone as their pastor. The chaplain said that I needed to bring my ordination certificate. I remember turning around in my office chair and looking at my framed ordination certificate that was hanging on the wall. I said, “Ahh, it is in a big frame hanging on my wall,” and the chaplain said to not worry and bring it in to his office in the frame. So, I drove downtown, parked, and walked into the jail carrying a large framed ordination certificate. They put that frame on the copier and made copies! So, now if anyone needs a visit in prison, I have copies of my ordination certificate already made!

 What breaks your heart? Who breaks your heart? Our intern pastor Roy challenged us last week to think about getting in some good trouble, some necessary trouble. Who can you get into good, necessary trouble for? I was talking with a friend the other week and she shared with me some good advice. She said that when she is in a funk, she knows that it is time for her to go do something good for someone. It is a random act of kindness night. She made a sign that said you are loved for the school janitor one night and taped it on the janitor’s closet door. She said that the janitor kept that sign of kindness and love on the door for months. A random act of kindness night. I love when we are able to immerse ourselves in God’s perspective.

 Immersing the people in God’s perspective is what Isaiah was trying to do in our lesson for today. Scholars believe that Isaiah was written by three separate authors, so they divide the book up into First, Second and Third Isaiah. Second Isaiah is thought to have been primarily composed when God’s people Israel were in exile in Babylon. Our Scripture today comes from Third Isaiah, and it was written after those exiles returned home, something they had hoped and dreamed for generations. But all was not well when that homecoming finally took place. The exiles returned from Babylon to a city in ruins, a place devastated by war and capture, and they felt impoverished and disillusioned. They wanted a new start and for life to finally get back to how things used to be.[[1]](#footnote-2)

 The people believe that they are seeking God through their fasts, but they forgot that in Isaiah the words told them in 1:17 that they were to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”. A life of following God is about seeking justice and righteousness for the poor and oppressed. The people have missed God’s desire that worship be inseparable from a life of justice and compassion. A life of following God and Jesus is about inhaling God’s grace for ourselves and exhaling that grace out into our world.[[2]](#footnote-3) A life of following God and Jesus is about piety and personal spiritual discipline and social justice and responsibility. It is about prayer, fasting, worship, reading our Bible and setting free the mistreated, sharing our bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless into our house and covering the naked. Isaiah 58 says when we do those things, then our light will break out like the dawn and we will be healed quickly. “If you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon.” We will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that won’t run dry.

 Loving others is God’s favorite form of worship and you can’t love others without serving others. On March 1 the season of Lent begins. Lent is this 40-day period of self-reflection, and it is a spiritual cleaning of sorts. Many people will fast or deny themselves something to attempt to align their own priorities with God’s. In our Scripture Isaiah wants the people to fast from their affluence, from their indifference, from their privilege so that the entire community will live in harmony with one another and with God. A fast not from food but from injustice, oppression, hunger and homelessness. Perform deeds of justice and we will be fasting as God wants. It reminds me of the Apostle Paul’s words in his letter to the church in Philippians 2:12, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”. We are called to pour out ourselves for justice and righteousness, that is how we work out our own salvation. What we do matters. How we give matters. How we treat all people matters. How we treat immigrants matters. How we treat Muslims matters. How we serve matters. How we treat those we disagree with matters.

 Do you have someone in your life that you disagree with? Could you do a random act of kindness for them? Intentionally go out and do something amazing for them? Pray for God to give you ideas, and you are going to come across something or somebody that is going to break your heart. It might seem like a problem that is too big for you to do anything about. If this happens, resist the urge to run away and hide from the pain. When you are seeking God’s guidance and something breaks your heart, that is the Holy Spirit guiding you, leading you, pulling you, just like God pulled Natalie into that apartment building. We don’t have to fix the entire world, but each of us is called to do something.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The thing that breaks your heart might just be where you are called to start digging deeper, praying more persistently, seeking ways to love in the midst of pain. Tutor at a school, ask your boss about recycling at your company, walk more, create a pattern of justice and incorporate it into your day. Treat the person at the dry cleaners or at the McDonald’s drive-thru with as much respect and value as you would treat the CEO of your company. That is how we follow God. Roll down your window at the stoplight and talk to the homeless person as a human being. Ask what their name is, tell them that you will pray for them and then do it. That is how we worship God. Mend fences with your family members and build bridges to your enemies. That is how we have hope. We all have 24 hours each day and if something is important, then we fit it in.

 Your life will never be the same. Your life won’t be able to be centered around your personal happiness any longer. Your life will have started to become worship that is pleasing to God, a kind of worship that leads to blessings of joy and happiness you can’t even begin to imagine. May we seek to worship God in a way that pleases God. Pray about what breaks your heart and see where God guides us. May we inhale God’s grace for ourselves and exhale that grace out into our world. Amen.

1. Much of this paragraph taken from Rev. Shannon Kershner’s words found here: http://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2017/020517.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. from Rev. Shannon Kershner’s words found here: http://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2017/020517.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Thanks to Rev. Dana Coker for her help with this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)