

“A Lifestyle of Compassion”
Isaiah 58:6-12 and Luke 10: 25-37

People respond to our second scripture reading, Isaiah 58:6-12, in different ways. Some get downright angry when they hear it. Others like this text a little too much, and respond self-righteously. And still others resonate with this text, knowing that it “sounds right,” but feel overwhelmed by the challenge of living in the way described in these verses. Let’s listen now to some responses to our text.

The Angry Response

Oh, for heaven’s sake. Another harangue about the poor and homeless. And I’m supposed to feel guilty? Can’t those people get a job like everybody else? Did the guys who wrote the Bible ever work for a living? Give me a break!

The Self-Righteous Response

At last, somebody is telling it like it is! People won’t listen when I talk about the poor and homeless. But they listen to the Bible, don’t they? And *this* is exactly what they need to hear. If only people would take it to heart, then we’d really be the church. I wouldn’t be embarrassed to call myself a Christian.

The Overwhelmed Response

Well, yes, I guess I am supposed to be a caring and giving person. I suppose that’s the Christian thing to do. But how can I? It’s hard enough to take care of myself and make ends meet for those who depend on me. Take in the homeless? How can I take such a risk – especially if I have a family? I agree that something sounds right about all this. But is it realistic? Is it possible?

I don’t know about you, but I can tell you honestly that I identify with the last response – the overwhelmed response. My life is already so busy and full I can hear myself saying, “I agree that something sounds right about all this. But is it realistic? Is it possible?”

But, before we decide together whether the challenge extended to us in Isaiah 58:6-12 is realistic or possible, we had better be very clear what our text really says, and how we are being called to respond.

First of all, let me take a few moments to describe the setting of our scripture text. Most contemporary Bible scholars believe that Isaiah 58 is set in the period following Israel’s return from exile in Babylon. As you may remember, in 587 B.C., Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, with many of its leading citizens taken into exile in Babylon.

God’s people were utterly humiliated. The temple in Jerusalem was in ruins, and, in exile, God’s people wondered if God was still there and still cared for them. Were they still God’s special people? Did they have a future as God’s people?

Chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah address these questions with words of hope and promise. God clearly says: “Yes, I am still with you. Yes, I will restore you. Yes, you are still my people. Yes, I am doing a new thing.”

In chapters 56-66 of the book of Isaiah, we find that many of God’s people have returned to Jerusalem and are beginning the work of rebuilding the temple and rebuilding their lives. Many of those who returned from exile understood that they had deserved the disaster they experienced; they had turned their backs on God and his covenant. Now in the time of restoration, they were careful to observe days of fasting and follow prescribed worship rituals. By fastidiously engaging in religious practices, they hoped to ensure that they would never again experience a disaster like the exile.

In our text for today, God’s people complain that, even though they are fasting and engaging in prescribed rituals, God does not seem to answer their prayers, and they are puzzled by God’s perceived disinterest.

In response to their complaints, God makes it very clear that he does not desire his people to merely go through the motions of fasting and rituals. In the words of our text, God says:

This is the kind of fast day I’m after:
to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed, cancel debts.
What I’m interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families (v. 6-7).

God goes on to say:

If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight (v. 10).

Friends, it’s not that God doesn’t want his people to fast, or pray, or worship, or reflect on Scripture, or engage in any of a variety of faith practices intended to help believers honor and grow closer to God. It’s just that God understands that we can go through all of these right and good religious motions and miss what’s really on God’s heart, and miss the call that God extends to his people...the call that is so clearly articulated in our text for today.

So, just what is this call that God extends to his people in Isaiah 58? It seems clear to me that the call God extended to his people in Isaiah 58 is the same call that he extends to his people today. And that is the call to a compassionate lifestyle.

And just what is this compassionate lifestyle supposed to look like? Well, first and foremost, in the spirit of our text for today, it will be a lifestyle committed to alleviating the suffering of all God’s children. But, I think we can develop an even sharper picture of the compassionate lifestyle to which God calls us.

The sharpest picture of the contours of a compassionate lifestyle is found in our first scripture reading for today, Luke 10:25-37. Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable provides us with a rich understanding of compassion. We all remember the story line. A traveler is attacked by robbers and left for dead. Two religious professionals, a priest and a Levite, come upon the man in distress, and pass by without offering aid. A Samaritan traveling on the same road comes upon the man, stops and cares for him both in the moment and over time.

This, friends, is a biblical snapshot of compassion. Compassion causes us to recognize or see difficult situations in people's lives, and then compels us to do something to make the situation better. Notice that there are two parts to the equation: seeing and doing. To be sure, the religious professionals in Jesus' parable saw the man left for dead, but they did nothing to assist him. The Samaritan man saw the need and did something to make the situation better.

This is the lifestyle God calls his people to embrace...a lifestyle of compassion...a lifestyle of seeing human need and doing something to alleviate it. It is the lifestyle to which every believer is called...young, older, rich, poor, men, women and children of every race and tongue...all are called.

I really mean it when I say that believers of all ages are called to engage in a compassionate lifestyle. Over the years I have been so moved by the true story of the compassionate actions of Trevor Ferrell; a story that began when Trevor was eleven years old.

On a cold December night in 1983, Trevor Ferrell saw a TV newscast about people living on the streets. Those images stirred compassion deep within Trevor and he pleaded with his parents to take him to downtown Philadelphia that very night so he could give his blanket and pillow to the first homeless man he met. Over the next several months, with the help of family, classmates and neighbors, Trevor made nightly trips into Philadelphia to distribute food, clothing and blankets to the homeless.

Trevor's efforts eventually came to be known as Trevor's Campaign for the Homeless. This campaign gave birth to a number of sophisticated outreach programs for the homeless of Philadelphia. Many of these programs are still in existence, and they all began with the dream and compassion of one small boy...a small boy who saw great need and did something to make the situation better.

I can imagine that some of you might be thinking, "Well, that's great, Robin, but that feels a bit "big" to me. I don't think God is calling me start a homeless ministry here in Spokane."

I would encourage all of us to remember that even seemingly small acts of compassion can have a big effect in the Kingdom of God. Let me share a few examples.

As I announced earlier in the service, next Sunday is Souper Bowl Sunday. Now, I know that the Chicago Bears and the Indianapolis Colts are playing a football game next Sunday. But, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the S-O-U-P-E-R Bowl. The Souper Bowl began 16 years ago when Presbyterian minister Brad Smith was a seminary intern at Spring Valley Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina. The youth of this small church asked the people in worship on Super Bowl Sunday to donate \$1.00 each to support local ministries that fed the hungry.

The next year, the church's youth challenged other youth groups across the country to do the same thing in their community. In the last 16 years, youth groups

participating in the Souper Bowl of Caring have raised \$33 million to feed hungry people. Even small acts of compassion can have a big effect in the Kingdom of God! Don't forget to bring your dollar for the offering next Sunday!

In our own congregation, children and adults in our congregation donate pocket change during Vacation Bible School, and recycle aluminum cans throughout the year so our congregation can sponsor a boy in Haiti and a girl in Rwanda through Compassion International, a Christian child sponsorship agency. With pocket change and aluminum cans, we ensure that two children, who are most precious to God, get to go to school, have at least one nutritious meal each day, and have access to Christian fellowship and training. Even small acts of compassion can have a big effect in the Kingdom of God.

This is the witness of Scripture: we are called to a lifestyle of compassion...a lifestyle of seeing human need and doing something to alleviate it. This is the lifestyle that is pleasing to God.

So, how shall we respond to our scripture text for this morning? As I said in the beginning, people respond to our text in many different ways. Some get angry. Some respond self-righteously. And still others, including many of us, resonate with this text. We know that it "sounds right," but feel overwhelmed by the challenge of living compassionately.

I'd like to suggest this morning that we respond to this text with prayer. The call to compassionate living is an overwhelming call. The need is so great, but, friends, don't forget that the God who calls us to this compassionate lifestyle is a great and compassionate God. The God who calls us is so very able to strengthen us and equip us to reach out with compassion to our needy world.

It has been said that, "Prayer is opening ourselves to God so that he can open us to others." With the boldness and confidence let us open ourselves to God in prayer, trusting that God will fill our hearts with compassion for others. Let us pray.

Prayer

O Lord,
open our eyes that we may see
the deepest needs of people.
Move our hands that they may feed the hungry;
touch our hearts that they may bring warmth to the despairing;
teach us the generosity that welcomes strangers;
let us share our possessions to clothe the naked;
give us the care that strengthens the sick;
make us share in the quest to set the prisoner free.
Gracious and compassionate God,
bless us all with compassionate hearts.
We ask in the strong name of Christ our Lord.
Amen.

- Robin Garvin
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