

SERMON TITLE: "Improving our Lives through Spiritual Disciplines: Acting with Mercy & Justice"
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 58:6-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 29, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of this new year, we've been talking about how spiritual disciplines improve our lives. So far, we've focused on the spiritual disciplines of receiving communion, reading the Bible, reaffirming our baptisms, and praying. Today's spiritual discipline is less likely to happen inside a church or even inside our homes. More likely to happen in the marketplace, on the job, at school, on the street, or in the public square, today's spiritual discipline connects our believing minds and hearts to our hands and feet. Today's spiritual discipline forces us out of the comfort of our pews and couches and moves us out into our neighborhoods and society, acting with mercy and justice.

1—BIBLICAL MANDATE

On January 19, five of us from our church went to the State Capitol to join with other people of faith in advocating for the poor and homeless who live here in Utah. As we do every year on Faith Day, we each tried to get the attention of our legislative representatives to share our concerns and ideas on matters pertaining to the hungry and homeless. But first, we gathered in a large meeting room to share some information and inspiration. One piece of that inspiration was Isaiah 58. A woman from a Jewish synagogue explained to us that this text is read each year on Yom Kippur, the most holy day in the Jewish faith. She then read it to us in English and chanted it in Hebrew. We people of faith heard this text as our call to action to get busy advocating for the poor.

Isaiah 58 was originally addressed to the Jewish people who were living in exile in Babylon. They were wondering why they were suffering so much. They thought they were being faithful to God, and they were wondering why God wasn't rescuing them from their exile. They thought they were

practicing the spiritual disciplines of righteousness. They were even fasting as a way to get God's attention. So why wasn't God listening? Why wasn't God helping them?

So God gave the prophet this message for them. There is more to proper fasting, said God, than going without food. Like other spiritual practices and rituals, fasting can be very helpful in focusing our attention on God. But if those rituals of worship are accompanied only by quarrelling, fighting, oppressing, and serving our own self-interests, then that kind of spiritual discipline isn't going to win us any favor with God. Instead, in verses six and seven, the prophet instructs that the kind of fast that God chooses is "to loosen the bonds of injustice" and "let the oppressed go free." The kind of fast God wants is "to share your bread with the hungry, . . . [to] bring the homeless poor into your house," and to cover the naked.

In verse 10, the prophet continues this list of what God wills for us. God wants the people to "offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted." In verse nine, the prophet also indicates that God wants them to stop pointing their fingers and speaking evil. In other words, God wants them to stop blaming the poor for their misfortunes. God wants those who have resources to stop speaking trash about those who are suffering through no fault of their own. That kind of talk only serves to perpetuate excuses for those who prefer to avoid getting involved.

We can easily imagine the response of the exiles to these words from the prophet. What do you mean that God expects us to help the poor and the oppressed? We are the poor and oppressed! Our homeland and our temple in Jerusalem were destroyed, and we were dragged here to this foreign land against our will. Our privileges and benefits have been taken away from us. It's the Babylonians who are oppressing us! We don't want to be here! We want our freedom! We want to eat our own food! We want to speak and understand in our own language! We want to be in our familiar surroundings with our familiar customs! We don't like that everything is so difficult here! We don't like feeling like outsiders and second-class persons! We want our rights and dignity! We want to go home!

And, no doubt, the complaints of the exiles were justified to a large extent. Their lives had been disrupted in horrific ways. Obviously, they were living in less-than ideal circumstances, and it would only be natural that they would want their situation to improve. God knew that, and eventually God did help them to return to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem, the temple, and their lives. But before that could happen, the Jewish exiles had some spiritual work to do.

God wanted the Jewish exiles to realize that even while they were living under duress in Babylon, even while they themselves had a long way to go to reach their dreams—even then—they had the ability and responsibility to act with compassion and generosity toward other people. If the exiles wanted God to help them, then the exiles needed to stop thinking selfishly only about their own interests. They needed to overcome their apathy to others' pain and get busy acting with mercy and justice toward those who were even less well-off than themselves.

When you do that, said God through the prophet, that is when God will respond to your prayers and help you. Your fasting will bear fruit when you stop pointing your finger of blame. Your prayers for God's assistance will be heard when you stop taking advantage of other people. Your own life will be much improved when you do your part to help others in need.

2—HOW DO ACTS OF MERCY AND JUSTICE IMPROVE OUR LIVES?

Acting with mercy and justice is clearly a biblical mandate, here in Isaiah 58 and in many other passages of scripture—like Psalm 72, which was the basis for our Call to Worship. But we still struggle sometimes with this spiritual discipline. We find it difficult because we don't see what's in it for us. How does it improve our lives to focus our positive attention on others?

Some years ago there was a sports story in the news. It was about a high school wrestler in Massachusetts. Deven, who had won 28 of his 29 matches that season, was leading his team toward a state title. But instead of being arrogant or cocky, instead of belittling others with less skill, Deven did something great at his wrestling meet. There was a special needs student from one of the other schools

who needed a match. The coach of the boy with Down Syndrome wondered if any of the athletes from the other schools would wrestle him. Deven volunteered, and instead of taking advantage of his lesser-abled opponent, Deven allowed Andy to pin his shoulders to the mat. When the 10-second contest was over, Andy was laughing and happy as he shook hands with Deven and the referee. Deven didn't think much about the match, but others certainly did as a video of it was posted to Facebook. As Deven's act of sportsmanship went viral, it was picked up by several TV stations. When interviewed, Deven said he was blown away by all the publicity, as he considered what he did "just a simple act of kindness." This merciful action caused the prime athlete and top-ranked wrestler to have two losses on his record instead of only one. But, in the eyes of thousands, Deven's life was improved by his act of mercy to another person.*

*By Paul Newberry, AP, Jan. 30, 2016, *The Standard Examiner*, 3B.

Did any of you shovel or blow snow off someone else's driveway or sidewalks in the past week or two? That could well have been an act of mercy and justice. It improves your life through making you feel like a good person, through improving your relationships with other people, and possibly through increasing the likelihood that someone will return such a favor to you some day.

Here at the church this month of January, we've been donating money for the Souper Bowl of Caring. We will send that money to Catholic Community Services, for their food pantry, so those who are hungry can have food to eat. We could ask ourselves, "Wouldn't it improve our lives more if we just took care of ourselves? Wouldn't it be more fair if each individual or family was responsible for themselves? Isn't the meaning of "justice" to do what's good for "just us"?"

But again, there are a lot of good benefits to us when we behave in charitable ways. When we walk the talk of Christian faith, it feels good to live in alignment with our stated values. When we imagine hungry people not having to worry about their next meal, that makes us feel positive. When people in our community have the nutrition they need to go to school, to go to work, and to fight off sickness, then they are going to be more productive citizens and neighbors. That's good for us too.

Acting with mercy and justice is a complex spiritual discipline. It isn't only about giving donations of our time and resources. It's also about public policy, advocacy, and voting. If we donate money to our local food bank, but our elected leaders adopt a budget that limits funding to food banks across the state, then we collectively are undoing or neutralizing the very good we try to do. If we work very hard on church fundraisers to support the Ogden Rescue Mission and the Lantern House homeless shelter, but vote for representatives and senators who prioritize tax breaks to the wealthy over affordable housing, then we are fighting against ourselves. That's why we need to pay attention to public policy. We need to express our opinions to our elected leaders and vote for those who share our values. That's when we and those in need will get the most benefit from our spiritual discipline. That's how we will improve our lives by acting with mercy and justice.

CONCLUSION

In the Friday Study, we're reading a book about John and Charles Wesley, the founding fathers of the Methodist faith in the 1700s. In John's sermons and in Charles' hymns, the two brothers taught the importance of having both a personal relationship with Jesus and a loving relationship with our fellow human beings. John and Charles spent a lot of energy fighting against the notion that a person could be a solitary Christian. In the preface to their 1739 hymnal, John wrote,

The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. 'Faith working by love' is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. 'This commandment we have from Christ: that he who loves God, [must] love his brother also'; and that we manifest our love 'by doing good unto all.'

For the Wesleys, such social holiness included caring for widows, orphans, prisoners, and the sick. Such acts of love included educating children, increasing opportunities for women's leadership, and speaking out against slavery. The Wesleys would agree that 'by doing good unto all' we improve our society for those who are most oppressed and impoverished. And by practicing this spiritual discipline, we improve our own lives as well. So let's get busy acting with mercy and justice.