

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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You are Salt for the Earth

*This is the kind of fast I want: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the chains of poverty, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. - Isaiah 58:6-9a
You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. – Matthew 5:13-17*

I spend between a quarter and 40% of my time getting ready for or leading worship. That's about ten to fifteen hours a week. And that's just me. The pianist spends several hours a week planning and rehearsing her part. The choir director chooses an anthem and leads the choir practice. The Office Administrator and volunteer ushers, greeters, readers and coffee servers diligently plan their roles. This weekly gathering takes a fair amount of time and energy to prepare.

And I don't begrudge that. I think worship is important. I love being involved in worship. I love the music. I like lifting up our hopes and worries in prayer. I like the ancient wisdom of the Scriptures and the effort to consider what those words might mean for us today. I even like the announcements, the ways in which we remind each other of the different activities we engage in as a community.

But sometimes, when I am reading those ancient words, I am reminded that God isn't much impressed with our worship, when it doesn't lead to a community of compassion and justice. The prophet Micah completely rejected extravagant sacrifices, saying that what God really wants is for us to live justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. The prophet Amos went so far as to say that God hates and despises festivals and solemn assemblies, will not accept our offerings, and is repulsed by our music, when it is does not do what God wants, which is to "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

The prophet Isaiah, in this week's reading, carries on that theme. People are complaining that their fasting doesn't seem to be effective because God isn't giving them what they want. But Isaiah speaking in the name of God, says (and I paraphrase): "your worship and fasting doesn't please me because you worship and fast right alongside your bickering and your selfishness. Your worship coexists with the hunger of the poor, with the oppression of your workers, with homelessness and gossip and meanness. Your worship isn't really about me at all. All you are trying to do is to manipulate me into giving you what you want. You want me to bless you.

Your worship isn't real worship at all. It is the worst kind of superstitious magic, trying to manipulate the powers of the universe so that you can get what you want."

Today there is a form of this called the Prosperity Gospel. It says that if you have real faith (and send your money to the right ministry) God will bless you in your wallet. God will make you rich! But that's not real worship. Real worship isn't about getting what we want. That's self-centred, selfish religion, false religion.

Real worship takes our wants and needs out of the centre and puts God there. Real worship is focused on finding out what God wants and doing that. And what God wants is justice. What God wants is compassion. What God wants is for all God's children to be treated fairly, given the respect they are due as God's children.

There is a little line in this passage from Isaiah that I puzzled over for some time. Isaiah is saying what God wants from people instead of fasting and sacrifice: (slide)
What I'm interested in is for you
to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and do not hide yourself from your own kin.

It is that last line that I puzzled over. I wondered what hiding oneself from one's relatives had to do with the hungry, the homeless or the naked. At first I thought it was a completely different issue: about spending time with your family, which is important. But then I realized that ancient Israel was a tribal society, a kinship society in which everyone was considered related to each other. In that context, anyone you might come across was at least a distant cousin. So the hungry, the homeless, the naked, are all your cousins, your kin, and if you don't help them, if you avoid them, you are hiding from your own family members.

In the New Testament, when Jesus says to love your neighbours, he isn't saying anything a lot different than to stop hiding from your kin. Stop pretending that their problems don't impact you. Stop pretending that their problems have nothing to do with you. Because we are all related, we are all children of one God and one earth. The circle of our neighbours includes all people, all creation.

(Slide) This past week, I came across a poster from the Central Alberta Poverty Alliance which talks about the importance of Social Connections: "People who are socially isolated or lacking in positive, helpful connections are at high risk of health problems, poverty and social exclusion. People with extensive social connections

linking them to people with diverse resources tend to be more ‘hired, housed, healthy and happy.’” Being good neighbours, in other words, can solve a lot of problems.

Being a good neighbour is the way we are salt for the earth and light of the world. Being a good neighbour is the way we fulfill the law and the prophets. Being a good neighbour, not hiding from our kin, making sure that the hungry have enough to eat, that the homeless have a safe place to sleep, that the poor have their needs taken care of, that is the way we do justice in our own communities. Of course, often our communities are segregated economically, so our physical neighbours are often of similar economic situation as we are. Being a neighbour to people who live farther away, who we don’t know personally, whose needs are very different, is more complex and challenging, but the same basic principles are involved. It is basically about not hiding from those who need our help.

This week is International Development Week, a week to recommit ourselves to the goal of improving the lives of the world’s poor. International Development has long been an important priority for Canadians. It is important because we have a moral obligation to share some of our good fortune with others. It is also a matter of enlightened self-interest: a poor world is an unstable world, and violence, disease and other problems associated with extreme poverty and injustice no longer stop at borders. Unfortunately, the support for International Development has been eroding in Canada. People have become cynical about Development Assistance. Even though our current budget for international development is significantly below our long term goals, in the last election the Conservative Party ran on a platform of cutting it 15% and the People’s Party proposed cutting it completely. I was astonished and appalled, in part because the past few years have seen the most dramatic successes in this area. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which set concrete targets in health, poverty, education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and international cooperation. Among other results, the number of people living on under \$1.25 per day was halved worldwide!

In 2015, the United Nations set seventeen new [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) with 169 specific targets to be met by the year 2030. Again the key is getting the world working together towards a holistic vision of what a better life would be like for all the world’s peoples. Those goals are summarized in five categories:

- **People**
 - to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions
 - to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.

- **Planet**
 - to protect the planet from degradation
 - sustainable consumption and production
 - sustainably managing its natural resources
 - taking urgent action on climate change

so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.
- **Prosperity**
 - to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives
 - that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature.
- **Peace**
 - to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.
- **Partnership**
 - to mobilize the means required to implement this Agenda
 - a revitalised Global Partnership for Sustainable Development
 - a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focussed on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable
 - participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people.

Here is a short (2 minute) video about the Sustainable Development Goals:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WODX8fyRHA&feature=emb_title

I am struck that both the Sustainable Development Goals and the Central Alberta Poverty Alliance invite us to participate in addressing the most pressing problems of our community and the world by becoming better neighbours.

One of my favorite quotes is from Tony Campolo, who said that “Jesus didn’t die so that we would go to heaven when we die. Jesus died so that our hearts would be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” The promise of the prophet is that when we align our hearts with God’s heart in that with God’s deepest wish in that way, then, “when you pray, God will answer; when you call for help, he will say, Here I am.”