

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

### FAST LIVING

Those of us who dare to cut on the television tonight to check out that strange spectacle called the Super Bowl are likely to see some fast living. The receivers and running backs will be fast. Those who spend lavishly to watch them run in person likely will be seeking a certain kind of fast living. I haven't yet seen the ads that will air in between plays for those of us who will be watching from home, but I am confident they will promote a similar kind of fast living as well.

A somewhat different kind of fast living was going on in the situation addressed in today's reading from Isaiah. The people were engaged in a fast, refraining from eating for periods of time in order to be focused in prayer. And yet, their kind of fast living was deemed unacceptable by God. We're Warner – a people known more for our eating than for our fasting - do we have a chance of being found acceptable by God?

We begin to see what is going on in Isaiah's situation when we hear the people ask God, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" There seems to be a desire for a transactional relationship with God, one where the people are hoping that if they do A, then God will give them B. But God is not impressed by their expressions of piety, because even though they are living sacrificially in their religious observances, their lives outside of the place of worship do not reflect God's values. The hungry and homeless are being ignored. Blaming and bitterness mark their relationships with others. We see that before Jesus combined love of God with love of neighbor as the highest imperatives, a similar combo love was being called for in plenty of texts from the Hebrew scriptures, including here in Isaiah. The message was that when they stopped seeking transactional relationships with God and others, when they opened their hearts to more transformational relationships, then their light would rise in the darkness and even their times of gloom would shine like the noonday.

We hear of Jesus teaching about light in our reading from Matthew, a part of his sermon on the mount. He says his followers are to be light for the world. There is an old Hasidic tale of a wise old rabbi who instructed his students by asking questions. He asked, "How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the dawn has begun?" After thinking for a moment, one student replied, "It is when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and be able to tell if it is a sheep or a goat." Another student ventured, "It is when there is enough light to see a tree, and tell if it is a fig or an oak tree." The old rabbi said, "No. It is when you can look into a person's face and recognize that one as your sister or brother. For if you cannot recognize in another's face the face of a sister or brother, it is dark indeed and the dawn is distant."<sup>1</sup>

Author Robert Fulghum tells of attending a conference on the island of Crete. The event was organized by an institute whose facilities overlook a small airstrip where in the Second World War, Nazi paratroopers invaded the island and were attacked by peasants wielding kitchen knives. The retribution was terrible - whole villages were lined up and shot for assaulting Hitler's finest troops. After the war, a deep hatred of the Germans abided in the people of Crete, so a man named Alexander Papaderos began an institute dedicated to healing the wounds of war. He figured if Cretans and Germans could forgive each other and construct a creative relationship, then any people could. At the conference, Papaderos was concluding his remarks and asked if there were any questions.

Fulghum, for some reason asked, “What is the meaning of life?” Those in attendance laughed and stirred to leave. But Papaderos responded, “I will answer your question.”

He took his wallet out of his pocket and removed a small round mirror about the size of a quarter. He explained, “When I was a small child during World War II, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun could never shine. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places that I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I grew up, I would take it out at idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I got older, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game, but a metaphor of what I could do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light - be it truth or understanding or knowledge - is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world - into the dark places of human hearts - and change some things in some people. Perhaps others seeing it happen will do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”<sup>2</sup>

We, as part of the church of Jesus Christ, have the joyful task of reflecting God’s light. We don’t just come here to do religious things in order to get God to do what we want. Neither do we get up on top of the roof blasting trumpets to announce what good people we are. But we do openly express that a life of compassion and sharing, a commitment to the ways of justice, reconciliation, and kindness is a wonderful way to live. We do it with more than what we find in our wallets. We let people know that what we do is in response to all that God has done for us. We know that we are not solving all the problems of hunger and homelessness and poverty and racism and war. Perhaps we’re not the charge of the light brigade, but what we do matters to those with whom we have contact, it matters to God, and it matters to us. The light we are blessed to get to reflect, reaches our hearts as well. It has a transforming effect. One paraphrase of the verse about light from our Matthew text reads: “You’re here to be light, bring out the God-colors in the world.” There are God-colors that are waiting to be brought out – with joy, that’s what we’re called and enabled to do. That’s the kind of fast living to which we are called.

<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001, p. 87

<sup>2</sup> Robert Fulghum, It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It, Ivy Books, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, The Message, NavPress, 2003.