

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements, the delight to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. if you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Sermon

What motivates us in our actions? Is it money or power, is it position or respect? For many of us, fear is the greatest motivator, or time, deadlines, even death itself. I wonder what motivated you to come tonight, to this service? You didn't have to come, well maybe you did if you are of a certain age. But most of us could have chosen to stay home, to relax, to watch what was on t.v. or whatever you would normally be doing on a Wednesday night. So why come to a service where you receive ashes on your forehead?

Tradition? Faith? Community? Maybe it was out of kindness to someone's request, or maybe you just don't know why, but here you are.

God had a lot to say about people's motivations and he shared those ideas with the prophet Isaiah. "Why do you fast only to quarrel and fight?" "Why humble yourself and bow yourself and make yourself look pitiful - it is not for my attention." "But in case you are confused, this is not the fast I am looking for."

God lays it out there, stop worrying about yourselves or gaining blessing through empty ritual or hollow acts. And here we are, about to share a table of bread and wine, and mark our foreheads with ash and I wonder, will tonight be empty, or will tonight begin a fast that is pleasing to the Lord?

In her novel Gilead, author Marilynne Robinson writes about an elder Pastor sharing thoughts and wisdom with his young child, things that he wants to pass on. In one section the main character recalls a day in his own childhood with his father.

I remember that day in my childhood when I lay under the wagon with the other little children, watching them pull down the ruins of that Baptist church, and my father brought me a piece of biscuit for my lunch, and I crawled out and knelt with him there, in the rain. I remember it as if he broke the bread and put a bit of it in my mouth, though I know he didn't. His hands and his face were black with ash - he looked charred, like one of the old martyrs - and he knelt there in the rain and brought a piece of biscuit out from inside his shirt, and he did break it, that's true, and gave half to me and ate the other half himself. And it truly was the bread of affliction, because everyone was poor then. There had been drought for a few years and times were hard. Though we didn't notice it so much when they were hard for everybody. And I guess that must have been why no one minded the rain. there had been so little of it...