
"Is Not This the Fast That I Choose?"

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Epiphany 5 – Year A

We all want to be good Christians, don't we? We want to do the right thing. And we're trying really hard. That's why we're here! But doesn't it sometimes feel like no matter how hard we try, it doesn't seem to matter? In spite of all our work and prayer, our troubles don't go away, we don't see any results, God doesn't seem to be paying attention! And we may start feeling some kind of way: discouraged, ignored, doubtful, even resentful.

In our reading from Isaiah, the Israelites are feeling some kind of way, too. They've recently returned from exile in Babylon, their long nightmare finally over. They've come back home, full of hope. They're doing all the right things, including fasting—especially fasting. Yet their hardships persist; and the rebuilding of their community and temple hasn't gone as they imagined. They pray harder, and fast harder, but it doesn't seem to make a difference. So they cry out to God, "Why do we fast, but you don't see? Why humble ourselves, but you don't notice? Why aren't you paying attention to us?"

But of course, God has been paying attention and has seen their fasting. It's just that God's not overly impressed by it, and explains why through the prophet Isaiah. "For one, you use fasts to serve your own interests! You make them all about you—about getting what you want, and being seen and esteemed and appreciated. For another, you're so caught up in your big show of piety that you're not paying attention to me—or to the people around you. Pull your head up out of the bulrushes and look at yourselves: how you're oppressing your workers and fighting with each other."

"That's not the fast I choose. *This* is: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. To share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. To cover the naked, and not to hide yourself from your own kin."

Now, few of us today are likely to get so caught up in fasting that we forget about service and charity. We're all so steeped in Scripture that we know that love for God and love for neighbor go hand in hand. We know that our liturgy sends us forth into the world, to love and serve the Lord. But we're still not immune to the spiritual dangers that the Israelites faced.

First, when we hear about all the good things God promises those who do these good works of mercy and justice, we may be tempted to make them a new kind of fast—a new way of winning God's favor and feeling good about ourselves. I remember the year I spent in a brand-new program called Ameri-Corps, right after college. I was assigned to a struggling elementary school in a struggling area of Atlanta, where I worked in a fifth grade classroom and after-school program. It was hard, heartbreaking work, and I saw a lot of heartbreaking things, which only increased my resolve to make a difference in these children's lives. I would've done almost anything for them. But I expected something in return. I didn't realize that until one day, one of the toughest girls in my class insulted me, in front of the whole class—the class that I was working so hard for and that I loved so much. And they all laughed. "Don't they see how much I care," I cried, "and how much I'm doing for them? Why don't they love me as much as I love them?"

On top of that, I wasn't seeing the results I'd anticipated for all my dedication: higher grades and test scores in the school; the end of poverty in this city; a pat on the back from the universe, thanking me for fixing all of its problems.

Sure, I cared about the children, I really did. But I was in it for myself, too, and I clearly had a healthy ego at the time.

Sometimes, I confused the needs of my ego with the needs of these children.

Second, there's the danger of mistaking our acts of charity, noble though they are, for justice itself. The fact is that sometimes, in our eagerness to do the right thing, *we* can forget to pay attention, too: to pay attention to “deeper questions about the distribution of power and resources”; to pay attention to the ways our actions might reinforce “existing patterns of status and wealth;”^[i] to pay attention to the very people we're helping—and to listen to them—and learn from them.

Note that Isaiah doesn't actually say just to feed the hungry (though that's a good thing, to be sure!), but to share bread—to *break bread*, our own bread-- with people who are hungry. And Isaiah doesn't just say “find shelter for the homeless” (though that's a good thing, too), but to bring them into your house. Of course, there are real obstacles to doing this, including the safety of others for whom we also care and are responsible. (Remember, we're to care for our own kin, too!) But what he's getting at remains: we are to make room in our lives and communities for those whose are most vulnerable.

This demands—real justice demands—something more of us. It demands that we give something up ourselves. It could be money. It could be time. It could be security or safety or convenience or privilege or control. It could be our self-image, or self-righteousness.

Now to be clear, just because I'm talking about this doesn't mean I've figured it out. I'm talking about it because I feel convicted. Because I see the need to search my own heart and examine my own practices and disciplines and the intentions behind them. And I invite you to do the same. I'm talking about it because I do want justice and dignity for all God's people; and because I want to live and love boldly, much more boldly than I am now; and because it scares me, all at the same time. What if I run out or wear out or fall flat on my face!

Isaiah answers this fear with the promise of abundance and guidance. “God's got your back, and will guide you, and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong. With God's help, you'll be like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” This doesn't mean, of course, that every endeavor will turn out the way we want it to. It doesn't mean that everyone will see what we're doing and applaud. And it sure doesn't mean we won't suffer.

That's just it. When we're really following God, rather than trying to get God to follow us—when we're really seeking the kind of justice that Isaiah is talking about, it does cost us something. After all, we worship Christ crucified. And he did warn us, didn't he, about the cost of discipleship.

And when we give up trying to control God through our prayers and actions, we just might hear what God really does ask of us. When we give up trying to show God how good we are, we may begin to see how good God is. When we stop trying to change God's heart or mind, perhaps we'll allow God to change ours, instead.

^[i]Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 119.