

Sermon Notes for 2/5/17 (Epiphany 5)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN
Text: Isaiah 58:1-9a
Theme: THE FAST THAT MATTERS TO THE LORD

The Point: God calls for no showy display of piety, but for the genuine fruits flowing from repentance, which brings about compassionate service of the neighbor's need.

Introduction: Fasting was a big deal for Old Testament Israel. Fasting was required on certain feast days, though it also was used in other ways as well. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees practiced fasting on two days out of every week. One author has listed the following five biblical categories of fasting. (1) Fasting is a sign of grief or mourning. (2) Fasting is a sign of repentance and seeking forgiveness for sin. (3) Fasting becomes an aid in prayer. (4) Fasting involves an experience of the presence of God that results in endorsement of his messenger. (5) Finally, fasting may be an act of ceremonial public worship. Unfortunately, like any religious practice, fasting could also be perverted by an act of hypocrisy.

It is said that Robert Redford was walking through a hotel lobby when a woman followed him to the elevator. "Are you the real Robert Redford?" she asked. As the doors closed, he replied, "Only when I am alone." One of the ugliest words in the English language is hypocrisy. Essentially it means not being what you really are, especially in the presence or perception of others. One definition we can find is this: "contriving a false appearance of virtue or goodness, while concealing real character or inclinations, especially with respect to religious and moral beliefs."

Isaiah speaks clearly and powerfully against hypocrisy in today's Old Testament lesson. "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?" Israel was acting as if they were an obedient and faithful people, thinking that, as long as they did their religious duties, they could act as tyrants and oppressors to their neighbors. As long as they did their assigned fasting, they could oppress their workers and make quarreling and fighting their way of life. God is not happy when people try to use showy displays to cover their wickedness.

Some years ago a remarkable picture was exhibited in London. As you looked at it from a distance, you seemed to see a monk engaged in prayer, his hands clasped, his head bowed. As you came nearer, however, and examined the painting more closely, you saw that in reality he was squeezing a lemon into a punch bowl! What a picture that is of the human heart! Superficially examined, it is thought to be the seat of all that is good and noble and pleasing in a man; whereas in reality, until regenerated by the Holy Ghost, it is the seat of all corruption. "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light." (*Moody's Anecdotes*, p. 69)

The hypocrite covers up his real heart with a showy display of what seems to be righteousness. Some examples from Scripture would include King David, who took the poor widow Bathsheba into his harem after he had been responsible for her husband Uriah's death. No doubt he expected people to admire him for his generosity to this unfortunate widow. Then there is King Ahaz, who refuses God's command to ask for a sign. He says, "I will not put the Lord to the test." Jesus labeled the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. One proof that He offers is this: "You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. [They were serious tithers.] But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

Luther speaking about Cain, after Cain had murdered his brother Abel: "Cain is not appalled; he does not grieve. He denies the deed. To this Satanic and insatiable hatred of the hypocrites Christ directs our

attention when He says (John 16:2): ‘They will think that they have done God a service if they kill you.’ Priests and kings filled Jerusalem with the blood of the prophets. Moreover, they exulted as though they had achieved something successful. They regarded it as zeal for the Law and for the house of God . . . These are instances of hatred that is satanic and not human. Human hatred abates with time or ceases entirely—at least after we have avenged the offense against us and have obtained satisfaction. But this pharisaical hatred daily assumes larger proportions, since it is cloaked with the appearance of piety.” [Luther’s Works, vol. 1: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5 (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Ge 4:10]

Satan uses the appearance of piety to try to mask evil intentions and evil actions. But hypocrisy is not limited to Bible characters, is it? It finds its way into our lives pretty easily. A person cheats on income tax, saying, “Well, if I have an additional \$1000, I will give \$100 to the church.” A student argues, “This teacher is not a Christian, so it doesn’t matter if I don’t give him my best effort on these papers.” A politician takes great pains to make sure to be seen in attendance at the local prayer breakfast while at the same time plotting to undermine a competitor’s business through political shenanigans. A man justifies his pursuit of divorce saying that he has prayed about it, so it must be okay.

When I was still young in ministry (a few years ago!), I thought that, if I could just tell Connie that the senior pastor or the congregation expected me to do this or that, I could get out from under my family obligations. That was hypocrisy of the first order, thinking that I could cover up my own neglect with the church’s approval. Fortunately, she didn’t put up with that for very long, and I learned quickly (if not perfectly) a better life balance.

If you do any shopping, you have probably observed that companies often take hypocritical steps in selling their product. What I mean is that you buy a jar of peanut butter or a box of laundry soap, the same size jar or box that you used to get. But – lo and behold! – there is less of the peanut butter or soap in the container than there used to be! No longer 64 ounces, but now only 61! That is what a hypocritical life is like. We can wrap ourselves in the same packaging every day – nice clothes, winning smile, friendly words – but still on the inside we are far less than we appear to be.

Our God has acted with authenticity and integrity in coming to earth as one who is fully human. Jesus presents the heart and the face of God to us in a way that calls us out of our hypocritical stance and into a genuinely human way of living. With Jesus, what you see is what you get, every time! No deceit mixed with His love! He says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” He has accomplished everything required by the law – not the trivial, trifling requirements of man’s commandments embodied in the Pharisee’s code of 613 laws, but the eternal will of the heavenly Father, especially His command to love all people, even our enemies. Jesus kept it without one error or failure.

Jesus fulfilled that law down to the last breath of His life, offering Himself as the payment for the sins of all people of all time and all places on this earth. Despite all the opposition that he faced from the hypocritical political and religious leaders, Jesus walked in full obedience to the Father’s call. That obedience led Him finally to the cross, where He was suspended between heaven and earth to become the linking point between God and mankind.

There is no hypocrisy in His invitation to you, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” He evidences only a sincere desire to welcome you into His embrace for today and for eternity. This Jesus the Messiah is the center of the Church’s proclamation. Paul said it like this: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” The crucified and risen Lord

– Him we proclaim as well, not in lofty words or wisdom, but simply and purely. Jesus is Lord! Trust Him to forgive and restore you today.

No matter how much you have labored to hide the real you from those around you – or even from God – Jesus’ invitation today is clear: “Whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.” Repent and believe the Good News, for that news is for you: “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but should have eternal life.” Drop your pretenses, and come with a repentant heart. Whatever deep pits your hypocrisy has caused you to fall into, the grace and mercy of God will pull you up and put you on a firm footing. Whatever the fallout from your insincerity, your Lord offers you a new start today.

The God who acts for our salvation through the gift of His Son desires for every one of us that we renounce our hypocrisy and live out a different approach to life. Repentance brings God’s desired fruit of obedience and service. “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?” Not only does our Lord desire that we act in these ways. He also provides the power and motivation for us to do so. God is concerned with those who suffer at others’ hands. He has claimed us as His own so that He might have agents of peace and joy and wholeness all around this world.

People are hurting in every place, St. Paul included. They ache for authentic love and lasting relationships. They want their hurts addressed. God wants His people to take their part, to sense their pain and suffering, to share their burdens. The hypocrite is focused only on his own reputation and position. God’s people are more concerned about serving those around them than about appearing to be in the right before the eyes of others.

What is the fast that God approves? “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?” Here is a proper fast, one which takes its eyes off our own waist line long enough to see the neighbor whose refrigerator is empty. The proper fast can let go of the “to do” list for the house long enough to reach out and care for the neighbor who is living on the streets of the Twin Cities during these grim winter months. The proper fast quits shopping at the Gap long enough to realize that some of our over-supply of clothing may well be a blessing to someone who cannot afford the gas even to get to the Goodwill store.

And what happens because of the true fast? The kingdom light shines brightly as the love of Christ creates a new reality, community and fellowship. Isaiah puts it this way: “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.”

Conclusion: God calls for no showy display of piety, but for the genuine fruits flowing from repentance, which brings about compassionate service of the neighbor’s need. The Queen Mary was the largest ship afloat when launched in 1936. She served through four decades and a World War. Today she resides dockside in Long Beach, California. Connie and I toured her some years back. One interesting feature is that, during the conversion, workmen took down her three massive smokestacks to scrape and repaint them. But in the process they crumbled to bits. None of their $\frac{3}{4}$ ” steel plate was left. All that remained were thirty coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel was gone. Jesus called Pharisees “white-washed tombs”. They were showy, but had no substance underneath. We have been given a new existence in Jesus Christ. Through Baptism you have been recreated, not just painted over again with a new skin, but brand-new from the inside out. Now you can live out the fast that is approved by God as you

serve your neighbor with the treasures that God has entrusted to you. And as you do, you can live a real life, free of hypocrisy and insincerity, full of the joy of the Holy Spirit, as real and genuine as the risen and living Lord, for Jesus' sake. AMEN!