

Bible study on Isaiah 58:6-8

By Rev. Sandra Hasenauer

Isaiah 58:6-8

"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." (NRSV)

"This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The God of glory will secure your passage." (The Message)

Background

These few sentences mark a turning point in the book of Isaiah. The words now collected into a single book took place over generations of the people of God, and follows them from home, to exile, back to home again. Isaiah 58 falls shortly after what scholars term the beginning of "Third Isaiah," or prophecies from a time when the Israelites were returning home from exile and finding that the glorious homecoming they'd expected had not quite taken place. Things were tough. There was tremendous poverty, inequality, and infighting. Groups of people were quick to blame one another, pointing fingers of condemnation and building walls of division at the same time as they tried to prove just how pious they themselves really were.

As you begin your reflections on Isaiah 58:6-8, it would be of benefit to backtrack a bit and read verses 1-5 to set the stage. This is all about how we "do church." It may not be so clear to us modern readers now, understanding what the references are in these verses from Isaiah, but in verses 1-5 the prophet is referring to the practices of fast days, Sabbaths, in which people would behave in extremely pious ways to show how faithful they were. They'd fast, lay on sackcloths, and cover themselves in ashes as external signs of religious piety. And yet, at the same time, they'd be quarrelling, fighting, striking one another: pious actions inside the doors of the worshiping community, while at the same time, oppression, exploitation, and condemnation outside the doors.

Into this setting, the prophet speaks the word of God: "The way I want you to 'do church' is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the yoke, free the oppressed," (to paraphrase). More than hymns sung at the top of our lungs, loud public prayers, and outward expressions of our piety, according to verses 6 and 7, God wants us to break the yoke of oppression, share our bread with the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, clothe the naked, and, by the way, be available to our relatives when they need help. This is, God says, the kind of "home" that should be created by those who had experienced homelessness themselves. According to the prophet, our worshiping communities are to be *right* homes, creating home for others.

When we do church the way God would have us do church, when we create right homes for ourselves and others, then we'll be healed—*all of us, God's whole world*—and will see the glory of God shining forth.

Questions for reflection:

1. When you think of the word "worship," what first comes to mind? After reading this passage, does it change your definition of worship?
2. Consider your own worshiping community, in light of this Scripture passage. How does it create home within the church doors? How does it create home outside those doors, in the community (nation, world)?