

There is a lot of unpleasant sounds in the first verse of Isaiah 58. God is upset and wants the prophet to shout and not to hold back. The announcement of Israel's sins needs to be as loud as a trumpet!

But what is Israel's sin? Well, it seems to be their double game of covering all their religious bases and at the same time strive to achieve their own self interests even by unjust means. They keep the spiritual discipline of fasting, but their fasting is not spiritually advantageous to them: they do not get any closer to God and God's justice. On the contrary, right during their fast, they abuse and exploit people: they choke off the indigent. Fasting should inspire one to be humble and consider the consistent providential care of the Lord and, with this in mind, strive to be just and considerate towards others.

There are those who have nominally started a spiritual journey with the Lord and need to pay attention to their attitudes and the way they choose to relate to others. Some who claim to worship God offer a poor example of their commitment when interacting with others. They often display an unpleasant and off-turning nastiness towards others. You may easily spot such people in churches, too. It's not their choice to be nasty. They just don't know how to correct or work on their attitude.

But God isn't simply talking about nastiness. God is exposing real injustice. God is pointing out social norms, caste

arrangements and systems that enslave economically those who are already in distress. God rebukes those who engage in and exploit those systems and then have the guts to scold God for not listening to their prayers or appreciating their fast. Whom are they fooling, God?

So, God clarifies what it means to be religious: an honorable and worshipful relationship with God is absolutely tied with an honorable and respectful relationship with our neighbors especially if we find them navigating life's challenges. God scolds back: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Is 58:6)

Shouldn't Israel worry about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the houseless, and not to avoid your kin in need. (see Isaiah 58:7)

A change in personal and collective, structural behavior will reconcile us to one another and to God and promote God's justice.

That is also Paul's call in his letter to the church in Corinth. He isn't talking to strangers and unbelievers. He is talking to church goers who should know better and not disregard the grace of God: "Be reconciled to God" and lead a life that does not prove you hypocritical and nullifies the spiritual path.

Jesus also insists on the theme of single-mindedness toward the true worship of the Lord: true worship is not performative but honors God by the way we treat others. If in any way we have been unjust, disregarded or even abused others and in so doing have displeased God, do not worry, just repent, make reparation and commit again to a life of justice.

Lutheran Pastor and author, Nadia Bolz-Weber, thus writes about Ash Wednesday:

“Here’s my image of Ash Wednesday: If our lives were a long piece of fabric with our baptism on one end and our funeral on another, and we don’t know the distance between the two, then Ash Wednesday is a time when that fabric is pinched in the middle and the ends are held up so that our baptism in the past and our funeral in the future meet. The water and words from our baptism plus the earth and words from our funerals have come from the past and future to meet us in the present. And in that meeting we are reminded of the promises of God: That we are God’s, that there is no sin, no darkness, and yes, no grave that God will not come to find us in and love us back to life. These promises outlast our earthly bodies and the limits of time.”¹

Let’s do a collective exercise tonight when we go to our respective homes. When we are ready to wash our faces

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints; Finding God in All The Wrong People* (2015)

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b, 6:1-10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

before going to bed, let's spend some time looking at that cross in the mirror and consider the hope and the love the Lord has for us and then let us rejoice, giving thanks to God. Amen.