



Sunday's Sermon

Pastor Lara Forbes



Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2021

Isaiah 58:1-12

Grace to you and peace from God, our creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's strange to think that eleven months ago, the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic was starting to become apparent. The lockdown hadn't begun, but people began paying closer attention to the illness - its severity and the fact that it was more than just the flu.

And within a matter of a couple of weeks, things changed quickly. There was a lockdown, and we were given a new set of instructions to live by. In a manner of speaking, a fast from our old way of life was declared. ¹Pastor Tim Brown puts it this way:

- Fast from indoor gatherings.
- Fast from outdoor gatherings of more than twenty-five people.
- Fast from unnecessary travel.
- Fast from in-person school.
- Fast from expecting a quick resolution.
- Fast from uncovered faces.
- Fast from indoor dining.

In essence, we were instructed to fast from in-person connections. As we continue to navigate that in varying degrees, it's particularly interesting to think about it as we observe Ash Wednesday - a day that reminds us of our mortality and death. Because today is also a day that reminds us of our connection to God and to each other *in life*.

The practice of fasting dates back thousands of years. Usually when we read about it, it's in terms of abstaining from food. But as we've come to experience, it sometimes involves abstaining from other things. And in biblical times, fasting was encouraged as a way to draw oneself closer to God.

So, it was never about the person or people doing the fasting - but about God. Because, as one drew closer to God while fasting, the expectation was that God's love and mercy would then be shared with others.

And in today's reading from Isaiah, that wasn't happening. The people had returned from exile and things weren't going the way they thought they would. So they fasted as a way to get closer to God.

¹ https://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/ash_wednesday_2021/

But *that* didn't produce the results they wanted, either. From their perspective, God hadn't acknowledged their efforts. So they asked, "Why do we fast if you aren't gonna pay attention to us? Why should we humble ourselves if you aren't gonna take the time to notice us?"

God's response to that was, basically, "Cuz you're making this about yourselves."

The people were only going through the motions. There was no humility in their actions, no recognition on their part about how they were treating others. They were seeking God's favor for their own benefit, and in the process they did it without serving others or treating them fairly.

They fasted by serving themselves instead of paying attention to the fast that *God* wanted. And that's what God's complaint was about. God had told the people throughout history what God asked of them.

That honoring the fast that the Lord chooses means caring for people who are vulnerable, who are oppressed, who cannot care for themselves. Because honoring the fast that the Lord chooses brings salvation - healing - not just for the people who observe it, but for the people who are served *by* it.

That's it. And it's just as true for us today.

Our salvation, our healing, is connected to that of others. Not *dependent* on it, but connected *to* it. As God's people - as part of the body of Christ - we experience salvation, healing, when we honor the fast that God chooses. And it's healing we don't have to wait for, it's healing we can experience today, even in a pandemic.

When we offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then *everyone's* light shall rise in the darkness and *everyone's* gloom will be like the noonday. *Everyone's* bones will be made strong and we will all be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

When we honor the fast that the Lord chooses, we - as a community of God's people - will be rebuilt. Not at some point in the future, but in *this life*.

And on a day that reminds us of our mortality, that's really good news.

Marking ourselves with ashes this year might seem ironic or even offensive because so many of us have had real reminders of death in our lives over the last several months. Particularly because we've been fasting from being in community in-person in order to keep people safe.

²But as these ashes make visible the sign of the cross we received in our baptism, they're a clear reminder of our life with God, and that we're a part of each other even when we can't be together. They remind us of how fragile each of our lives are, and also how precious and loved by God we each are.

³And whether you receive ashes today or not, we bear that cross on our foreheads each day. We bear the reminder of God's love for us and for each other. We bear the reminder of our connectedness to each other. We bear the reminder of salvation and healing that God brings to each of us.

When we honor the fast that the Lord chooses, we recognize that it isn't about us. When we honor the fast that the Lord chooses, we share God's love and mercy by taking actions to care for people who are vulnerable and who cannot care for themselves. We pray for one another and lift each other up.

And as this fast draws us closer to God, God brings healing - not just for us, but for the people we serve. It's healing that connects us to God and to each other. And it's healing that God brings to us in *this life*. Thanks be to God. Amen.

2 <https://dancingwiththeword.com/ashes-under-our-fingernails-on-our-foreheads-and-on-our-hearts/>

3 <https://dancingwiththeword.com/ashes-under-our-fingernails-on-our-foreheads-and-on-our-hearts/>