

Hespeler, 9 February, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 112, 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

God, I don't mean to complain, but I've got to ask, what is the problem here? I mean, we Presbyterians, we have got it all figured out, don't we? We believe all the right things. We have to because we work so hard at getting it right. We believe in God the Father the creator of heaven and Earth. We believe in Jesus Christ his only son and all the right stuff about his life and his death and his resurrection. We believe correctly about the nature of Christ and the nature of the trinity even if (if I can be candid here for a moment) it doesn't make a lot of logical sense to us.

We believe all the right things about the church and how it should operate. In fact, we are so careful about that that every time we even think of making any change in church policy we send it out to all the committees and go over the wording with a fine-tooth comb and make sure that we've got it just right before we adopt it. We don't care if it takes us years, maybe even decades, we will not make that change until we get it just right.

We are so careful and so correct, and yet what do we see happening in our church? As our friend, John-Peter, shared with us a couple of weeks ago, we find ourselves today in a denomination that is undergoing a steep decline, a decline that has been fairly steady and straightforward ever since 1959. Day after day we seek you and delight to know your truth and be correct in all of it, and yet this is what you let happen to us?

Why do we work so hard to be right, but you do not see? Why convince ourselves that we've got the answers, but you do not notice? Well, I guess the only thing we can do is just try harder to be all the more right all the time. Surly you will soon come around and give us what it is that we most desire.

I puzzled for a long time over our reading this morning from the Book of Isaiah. In it, the people of Israel are clearly going through a difficult time. They are feeling as if God is not giving them what they think they need. Now, I could probably tell you what it was that they were struggling with. Biblical scholars actually have some pretty good ideas about the enemies that surrounded them, the hard economic times they were dealing with and things like that. But I really think that the point of us reading it today has less to do with the things that they were actually struggling with and more to do with the things that we today sometimes struggle with.

The main point is that they were struggling just like we sometimes struggle. But they were complaining to God



specifically because they figured that they were doing everything right and so God ought to be giving them a better time. And, honestly, I think there are times when we also feel like that. So this passage suddenly seemed very relevant to me.

But here was my problem: the thing that they figured they were doing right was fasting. Now, fasting is something that does come up in the modern world from time to time, usually in the form of a diet craze. For example, these days everyone is talking about the *5:2 Diet* where you eat normally five days a week and then fast two. But they weren't fasting for health or because they were hoping to lose some weight. They were fasting because they had this notion that, if they went without food and suffered because of it, God should notice and give them what they really needed. And, what's more, they figured that they had this fasting thing just right, that not only did they have the hunger pangs, but they were also bowing down and humbling themselves just beautifully. It was a perfect fast. That is why they thought that their complaint against God was so legitimate. They were doing everything right, but God wasn't holding up his part of the bargain.

And I, honestly, have a bit of a rough time identifying with that. I mean, I know that there are some Christians in the world today who really get hung up over carrying out religious actions like prayers or fasting or rituals and doing them just perfectly, but that's not really how Presbyterians or most Protestants think about these things. You would never catch us suggesting that the only way to solve some problem we are having is by finding a certain ritual and executing it perfectly. So, it really seemed like there was no way for us to relate to the people that the prophet is addressing in this passage.

But then I thought about matters of belief. Protestants, you see, have this obsession about believing all the right things. I guess that, when we understand that we access our salvation by faith, it does make a certain amount of sense. If faith is so key, then surely what you believe matters. What's more, we all believe the truth matters and if truth matters, well, then it matters that you believe true things.

That is all fair enough, but there is a dangerous leap that we tend to make within that logic. We easily seem to fall into thinking that faith is just a matter of believing the right things about God, about Jesus, the Bible and a host of other things. And when we think that way, the stakes are suddenly very high. Suddenly, if I believe one thing and you believe something that's maybe slightly different, that is not just a matter for discussion, it becomes a matter of salvation! Suddenly questions of belief become things to fight over, maybe even die over. We also begin to expect that God should reward us and give us preferential treatment because we happen to believe all the right things.

But just as the prophet came to the people of Judah in our Old Testament reading this morning and said, “Do you really believe that God is going to give you all of these things that you think that you need simply because you do the right kind of fast?” so would God come to us today and say, “Why should I grant to you, as a church, all of these blessings and victories and growth because you think that you figured out all the right stuff to believe?” Just as they were focussing on the wrong thing by trying to get their fasts right, I believe we might be doing the same thing in our focus on belief and doctrine.

Again, this is not because these things don’t matter. Of course, they matter. They are of ultimate importance. But there is a great danger when we put all of our energy into working out these things that we miss the bigger aspects of our calling. What happens when, for example, we substitute “right belief” for fasting in the prophet’s diatribe?

“Look,” he might say, “you may get your beliefs all right, but you only seem to be serving your own interests as you do so. Sure, you do an admirable job in figuring out the right things to believe, but you seem to only do it in order to quarrel and fight with each other. Such good doctrine will not make your voice heard on high. Is this the right belief that I choose, creating perfect statements of doctrine and theology? Is this belief that is acceptable to the LORD?”

Now, to be perfectly clear, the prophet was not trying to suggest to the people of Judah that fasting and other similar religious observances and practices were bad things. On the contrary, he believed that fasting was a good thing. In the same way, the prophet would not chastise us for our quest to work out a belief system that is most perfectly aligned with the truth about God, the universe and everything. His caution was that the pursuit of that good thing was preventing them from seeking the better thing. Even worse, he was accusing them of substituting the good thing for that better thing that was absolutely needed from God’s point of view.

And what is that better thing? That better thing is justice. That better thing is the pursuit of a world and a situation where all are treated fairly, where outcasts and marginalized people are welcomed in and where those who are enslaved in any way are granted freedom. **“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?”**

I can only imagine how that was a problem with the ancient Judeans – how they were so obsessed with pleasing God with their perfect fasts, piously going without food and feeling so holy for it, that they totally failed to notice the people next door or homeless in the streets who were going

without food for anything but pious reasons. I can only imagine how it was for them, but I know exactly how it is a problem for us. When we get caught up in believing the right things, it can be so easy for us to reject certain people because they do not fit our idea of what a Christian is supposed to be or of what righteousness is and, even if we may not intend it that way, the result is often rejection and deep wounding.

Jesus understood and believed in the importance of right belief. **“Truly I tell you,”** he said, **“until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”** But he taught that compassion and care, especially for the outsiders, the rejected, the sinners and the forgotten, always trumped the importance of right belief. For what was the point of having the light of the knowledge of the truth if it did not shine before others. **“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”**

Our Old Testament prophet is very clear about how that could happen. It was only when you learned to prioritize justice, when you reached out to those living in the margins and when you shared what you could with those who did not have enough, that this promise was activated: **“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard... If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”**

Jesus understood that and agreed. It was what he was talking about when he spoke of the lamp set up on the lampstand and the city built up on the hilltop. It is still the only way for us to be what Jesus envisioned. So, by all means, do think about and joyfully discuss the things that you believe. They matter and it matters that you get them as right as you can (for none of us, I believe, will ever understand it all), but know that, far more than that you believe the right things, Jesus requires of you that you live out the faith in practical terms, that you act with compassion, love and understanding, because Jesus really does want your light to shine forth.