

“3 Simple Rules”

Sunday, August 7, 2016

11th Sunday after Pentecost

 **(Isaiah 1:1, 10-20, NRSV)**

[Read from Wesley Study Bible]

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

[2nd Service: *Modern Affirmation of Faith*]

[MESSAGE]

 The Book of Isaiah is the longest prophetic book in the Old Testament.

The prophet begins his work before the Babylonian Exile and speaks God’s word to a people who seem to have forgotten who they are.

Isaiah calls out a warning and offers paths to change.

Today’s passage comes at the very beginning of the book; the reading, however, leaves out the context by skipping over eight verses in which God accuses

the people of being obstinate and rebellious children.

Indeed, God has already punished all but a remnant of the people.

Isaiah reminds them that, if not for God's mercy, the whole nation would go the way of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now, I realize the mere mention of these Old Testament "*twin cities*" can spark debate and many diverse conversations.

However, the why's and the where-fore's of Sodom and Gomorrah are not the point of this prophetic text.

Remember, Old Testament prophets proclaimed from divine inspiration concerning God's purposes.

They admonished the wicked and comforted the afflicted.

👉 The prophet's role was to help people understand the will of God and the consequences of the choices they could make.

Today's reading uses the ancient judgement as a metaphor saying: "You rulers of Sodom" – religious leaders; "You people of Gomorrah" – the people in the pews; **"Listen up!"**

Let us pray...God, we come to hear a difficult prophetic word this morning; be with us in our difficulty. Help us to hear your words as you want them heard. Guide us toward the choices you want us to make. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

👉 As we try to bring Isaiah's words into a more contemporary context, we are still faced with harsh judgement.

We also hear God seeming to reject our best worship efforts, our music, our offerings, even our prayers.

This harshness can hit us the wrong way and cause us to miss the point.

What Isaiah wants us to hear is that God's problem with worship is the disconnect between what happens inside the church and what happens outside of the church.

So, yes, these words may feel harsh and they might pinch a few toes.

Here in our own church we often talk about worship and what a great job everyone does in bringing our various services together.

We often stress how important regular worship attendance is to building your relationship with God.

At least a couple times a year we talk about stewardship and encourage you to be generous with your financial offerings.

Every Sunday we bring our offerings to the altar and ask God to bless what we bring.

Just two weeks ago I preached a sermon on prayer and how God listens to us.

Now, along comes Isaiah to say: ***“God hates your worship!”***

He warns us that there is often a gap between our practice and our praise.

 **[Homeless Poster]**

Countless versions of this poster have been around for many years.

Some may be tempted to dismiss it as disrespectful to Jesus or overly simplistic or just glib marketing.

But, I don't think we can afford to dismiss this message if we are really paying attention to Isaiah's harsh criticism of praise without practice; worship without works.

This points to a perpetual human problem: translating our worship into action.

It is a cultural and individual issue.

We do a great job proclaiming our faith and shouting our praise, but our inattention to injustice delegitimizes our praise.

Please, do not hear this as criticism of what we do that is good and wonderful in ministry from this church.

We mustn't throw up our defenses shouting:

"But we do some really cool things at this

church; Isaiah must be talking to some other congregation, not us!”

That would simply be missing the point.

In our Monday Night Bible Study last week we were talking about the gifts that God gives us and what we choose to do with them.

John Ortberg, the author of our study, challenged us to imagine that your life is over and you are led to a small room.

There’s a chair for you, a really big chair for God, and a DVD player.

👉 God slips in a disk with your name on it and the title: ***“What Might Have Been”***.

“Imagine watching everything that God might have done with your life if you had let him. Imagine seeing what he might have done with your financial resources if you had trusted him to be generous. Imagine seeing what he might have done with your giftedness if you had trusted him enough to be daring. Imagine what he might have done in your relationships if you had trusted him enough to be

fully truthful and fully loving. Imagine what he might have done with your character, if you had dared to confess sin, acknowledge temptation, and pursue growth.”

☞ Now, let's go back to what Isaiah is trying to tell us.

It's not that we have bad intentions and it's not that we never succeed in doing the right thing.

The issue is that our worship, our prayers, and our busy “church stuff” doesn't really matter unless it leads us to be the people God intends us to be and to do the things that glorify God.

It's about transformational encounters with God that cause us to be new people born of hope and joy and promise.

That is what causes us to “*cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow.*”

☞ The prophet Micah reiterates Isaiah when he famously answers the question: “*What does the Lord require of you?*”

“To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

☞ And finally, our own John Wesley gave us **3 Simple Rules**: *“Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.”*

↓ In the end, Isaiah does not tell us to abandon our worship or to stop praying or to keep all our gifts to ourselves.

Worship is essential for us and requires of us an awed engagement with God that is life-giving, community transforming, and world-changing.

Worship makes it possible for us to hear this text together and imagine what it might mean for us.

Worship’s communal confession may free us to go and do what this word sends us to do.

Worship’s communal praise may offer us perspective and strength for obedience.

But, if we the people of God want to lift our hands to God in prayer, we must also extend our hands to the most vulnerable.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the
Holy Spirit. **Amen.**