

A Word for All God's Children

Our featured scripture this week speaks of being a “well-watered garden like a spring of water that won't run dry.” Baptismal waters continue to feed the streams of justice as we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us every time we set our hands and feet to the work God has for us to do. As we break bread today, we remember that as long as there are those who are hurting, hungry, excluded and oppressed, we are called be faithful disciples, setting a table and inviting all to the feast.

We Receive the Word of God Isaiah 58: 6-12

The Lord says: Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, “I'm here.” If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon. The Lord will guide you continually and provide for you, even in parched places. The Lord will rescue your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that won't run dry. They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account; the foundations of generations past you will restore. You will be called Mender of Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets.

This is the fifth week of Lent, this season of 40 days when we more intentionally follow Jesus as He calls us to live the sacrificial life with Him. During these 40 days we remember (sometimes as if we've never heard it) we remember again that God gave all of God's Self to us, and for us. Author Max Lucado says “The Maker of the stars would rather die for you than live without you.” On the cross we are face-to-face with the sacrificial love of God in Jesus, who died for us. In Catholic churches there is a crucifix above the altar as a reminder that Jesus died for us. We Protestants can forget (without that visual reminder) God's sacrificial love.

Our scripture this Lent has been from the Prophet Amos, who gave a hard and harsh message to the Israelites, who'd forgotten the Lord's command to care for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and to offer hospitality to the stranger. The Israelites, whom God had led out of slavery in Egypt into freedom, and out captivity in Babylon back into their own land, now looked out only for themselves. They had forgotten what it was like to be slaves and exiles, and the Lord was disgusted with their religious observances because they had no thought for those in need. The Lord said to them, “I hate, I reject your festivals; I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies. If you bring Me your burned offerings and gifts of food - I won't be pleased; I won't even look at your offerings of well-fed animals. Take away the noise of your songs; I won't listen to the

melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Today’s scripture is from the Prophet Isaiah, who also told the people that what pleases God is a sacrificial life.... not a life that looks out for and protects itself, but a life (and a people) who give away what they have for the sake of the mistreated, the poor, the hungry, the overlooked, the uncared for. In hearing these prophets we see as well the sacrificial love of God in Jesus. And we realize (again) that to follow Jesus is to have that sacrificial love: to “Love the Lord our God with all our passion and prayer and intelligence, and to love others the way we love ourselves.” This is a difficult life to live; to love as if all others are children of God, and to care about the physical and spiritual needs of all others. But it is the call of God to us.

I had several hours in the car with my son’s girlfriend on Friday as we drove to and from Sacramento for a funeral. I told her that I’d just read that the United Nations is declaring a humanitarian crisis in African nations that is epic in proportions, and that a concern is that our president plans to cut spending to foreign aid, and without that money, it’s possible that millions of people will die of starvation and disease. We talked about what we can do, and how to respond, to the overwhelming needs of the world. We agreed that we have so much, and so many resources, and yet there’s a feeling of helplessness, and resignation, and indifference in our culture, in our country.

The Prophet Amos has been keeping me company in this season of Lent: his message that what God wants from us is righteousness, justice, help, compassion, and action for the weak and the powerless. I don’t often witness to my faith to my kids (and Nikita is one of my kids) because they know who I am and what I believe... and hopefully I show them by how I live that I follow Jesus. But on Friday when Nikita and I were in the car talking about justice and righteousness, I realized that it feels like an enormous a task to make the world right, as God desires, and to make myself right with God. And I said to Nikita: this is why I need Jesus. I need to know that I’m forgiven for all the ways I fail to love and act on behalf of the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the immigrant... for the ways I fail to live a sacrificial life. I need to know that God is not finished with us yet, and that someday, Jesus will set the world right. It doesn’t absolve me from the responsibilities Amos and Isaiah have laid out us, but I am given grace. Jesus gives me grace. As all of us consider the requirements of God that Amos and Isaiah have made clear - that we work for justice and righteousness for all people - we need to know that we are God’s beloved, named and claimed as God’s own, and forgiven, and given a purpose. As we said at the beginning of worship, God has work for us to do. And we do it, we do the work of justice and righteousness, because Jesus loves and redeems and sets us free from guilt, to do what we can to make this world right.

Jesus was critical of the Scribes, the Pharisees, and Sadducees, who outwardly displayed their religion, and kept the Mosaic Law for its own sake, rather than as a way to live more deeply, and to help others experience more fully, God’s abundant love for

all people. Jesus called them “blind guides” and “white-washed tombs”. He described those with devotion to God (without care and concern for their fellow humans) as false and hollow. Again, it’s a gift and a blessing to understand the fullness of life in Christ through John Wesley’s teachings of the means of grace (staying in love with God) and works of mercy (actively loving others) as ways to fulfill the Greatest Command. And again, it’s a gift and a blessing to remember the grace of Jesus Christ, who knows us, knows our weakness and self-interest, knows our sin and indifference, and loves us, abundantly and unconditionally... and has work for us to do. The Worship Team has written on the strips of paper in our bulletins today. This is the work Jesus claimed as His purpose. This is our work too, the “fasting” of justice and righteousness that God chooses. Look at your paper for the work God could be giving to you: preach good news; proclaim release; recover sight; set at liberty; announce the time; heal the sick; feed the hungry; eat with sinners.

Throughout Lent we’ve been writing on strips of paper to hang on the wall where “Justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Today we are given papers with words already written on them... and these words could be a message for you, to light a fire in your heart, and they could be a message for our congregation, for you to lead us in a new ministry of justice and righteousness. Instead of putting your paper on the wall today, please take it home and read it and pray over it.

These words Jesus identified as His work are “mighty acts” of justice and rightness-with-God-and-others... and there are also little acts that we can do. Last year the Outreach Team asked us to buy only fair trade bananas as a way to protect the workers and the land where bananas are grown. Stitch-in-Time continues to stitch love and care into dresses for girls around the world. The Service Team is organizing ways for us to be the “The Church [Outside] the Building” when we go into the community to be the hands and feet of Jesus, to worship Him while we work. Another person just told me how important it is to her to look at homeless people, and to acknowledge them, even if she doesn’t have anything to give them. In all the ways we live, when we follow Jesus, we can give His sacrificial love to others.

There’s a Hebrew phrase I’d like us to take to heart. It’s “Tikkum [tee-koon] Olam [oo-lam]”. It means “repairing the world.” Let’s say it together: “Tikkum Olam: “repairing the world.” Our Jewish brothers and sisters understand the prophets Amos and Isaiah in light of Tikkum Olam: the work God has given us to do is to repair the brokenness, the injustice and the unrighteousness, in this world that God so loves.

Isaiah describes those who are doing the work of justice and righteousness, who are repairing the world. I offer his words to you: “You’re like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You’re known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, and make the community livable again.” That’s what we are called to do in acts, big and small, of justice and

righteousness: we are to help rebuild the world God created, to build God's Kingdom that is still coming on earth.

This Lent, in the company of the Hebrew prophet Amos, we've had an opportunity to look more deeply at our Jewish roots, the faith of Jesus, and to see the call of justice and righteousness continues through the ages. On Holy Thursday, April 13, we're celebrating a Seder Dinner here in Fellowship Hall. This is the dinner Jesus shared with His disciples - the last supper He had with them before His arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The Seder is a sacred meal, celebrated by the Jews every year on Passover, where God's mighty acts in delivering the Israelites from slavery and oppression in Egypt are remembered. This is our story too. Because of the Exodus, the idea of justice and freedom for all people formed a permanent impression on Jewish and Christian consciousness. We hear together the call of God for justice and righteousness for all people. I hope you'll come to the Seder to remember and celebrate what God has done, and what God is still doing in us, God's people.

And now, I invite you to close your hands—making a tight fist if you can. Lent became a time of giving up something as a sign of penitence in the Middle Ages. This season we continue to contemplate what we need to give up in order to let justice roll down, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, in our lives, in our church, and in our world. What stifles your generosity? What fear gets in the way of believing that there is enough for everyone? Now slowly open your hands, letting go of the tension there and imagine God's life-giving waters of justice and righteousness flowing over them.

As a sign of the assurance of God's peace and forgiveness,
let us come to the Lord's Table. All are invited to come to this feast where there is
enough -
enough room around the table, enough grace for all,
no matter what your journey has been -
indeed, where *you are enough*.
You need only be hungry. That's it.
Hungry for love, for justice, for change, for reconciliation,
for whatever your heart yearns for.
You can even just be hungry for food...
for bread of life or just bread.
God knows what you need.
Come and receive it, and by this, be inspired to offer it to the world.