

April 3, 2011
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 58:1-12
1John 3:18

The Fast I Choose: To Care for the Poor

Our reading this morning comes once again from the prophet Isaiah.

For three weeks now – these words from Isaiah have been a constant drum beat in our ears. They have been words about trumpets sounding - calling together the community. They have been words that *challenged that community's integrity* – prodding down underneath their acts of piety – uncovering their hypocrisy. They have been words that have *revealed God's heart* for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the disenfranchised, the powerless, and the voiceless – God's heart for justice. They have been words too of *promised healing* – in health and wholeness found in the midst of sharing instead of the self-serving. (Although I am not sure that we have heard those words too well yet.)

For three weeks now these words have worked on us. I have been listening to you. You and I have been convicted by these words. They have made us question our own acts of piety. They have made us look at our own integrity. They have brought us face to face with issues of justice. They have forced us (who have so much) to hear the voice of those who have so little. They have challenged us – and in many instances left us feeling guilty.

Before we read this morning's text I want to say this about our feelings of guilt. God never wants our response to his claim on us to be motivated by guilt – but always by love. Grace is

what erases guilt and replace it with love freely given. Grace is compassion mixed with forgiveness – handed out freely and generously – by God without cause or reason. Grace is God’s gift that frees us from the past – the guilt – and allows us to live as God’s new creation in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Scripture Reading

I want us to begin this morning by watching a video clip of story about homelessness that was aired in March by a TV station in Virginia Beach Virginia. – When we finish watching the clip I will ask you to share your thoughts.

http://www.wavy.com/dpp/news/local_news/cleaning-up-the-homeless-camp-in-vb

What do you think?

It seems to be that this news cast did a great job in conveying a predominately cultural message (for us in the US) – that homelessness is a problem to be dealt with – that it is an issue to be solved.

Never once did the reporter help us to understand the underlying issues of homelessness – lack of a job or a job that would pay enough to keep adequate housing – (working poor we call them).

Never once did the reporter point out that mental illness and addiction are two of the major contributing factors to homelessness.

Instead he pointed to the trash on the ground and implied that homelessness was a mess to be cleaned up.

It seemed to me that as I listened to this clip – that it was always somebody else’s problem – somebody else’s issue – the homeless themselves – the property owners who had allowed it – the cities – the Ocean Front Homeless Advisory Council.

Is not this the fast that I choose: says the Lord – to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

You know the scriptures never bear witness to God seeing the poor, the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the homeless, the helpless, the sick – as a problem that will or can be solved – an issue that can be addressed. Instead what we see is God’s reminder the ‘least and the last’ are just as human as the rest of us. Instead we see God’s heart of compassion for those who – ‘have not’.

In fact as I think about what the Bible says about God, and those who are poor, and those who are not poor – the problem is never ‘the poor’ – in fact Jesus says that ‘we will have the poor with us always’.

Instead the problem seems to be those of us who are ‘not poor’ and our unwillingness to share what we have been given – with those who have need. Instead the issue is us serving our own interest while we neglect the poor. (For a couple bucks we can help – through Helping Hands Ministry – get someone across town on the bus – in order to get the help they need while unemployed.)

This is not some kind of Old Testament perspective. It is not some Levitical law. It is there in the New Testament.

- All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possession and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Act 2:44)

- I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, ... (2Cor 8:13-14)

- How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? (1John 3:17)

It is never someone else’s problem it is always our problem.

And remember what I said – these reminders of how God created us to live together in community are not intended to fill us with guilt – instead they are meant to fill us with grace. The kind of grace that will help us to experience God’s love for us in order that we might love others – those who share our common humanity.

Where do we start – we start by seeing past people’s circumstances. We start by knowing that God loves those others every bit as much as God loves us. We start by learning to love them – not because they are deserving or because they are necessarily loveable but because they are loved by God who calls us to love each other.

In the next year we will literally open our home – here at Echo Hill – to the homeless poor.

The ‘Family Promise Program’ is a collaborative effort of local churches that is meant to provide shelter, meals, and supportive community to families that find themselves homeless. This is the way it works. Thirteen area churches commit themselves to providing a home for families who are homeless for one week 4 times a year.

During that week – classrooms or other space is turned into family space where the families will sleep and have private time. The fellowship hall is turned into the dining room where families will gather to share a meal around the table. The fellowship hall or other areas of the church might become the family room where folks gather to play, to learn, to be together.

During the day time – children will go to school, parents will go to work or to a place where they can improve their skills in order to find the kind of job that will provide for their family.

Those are the logistics.

We at Echo Hill are committed to this program – to opening our home to the homeless poor. The question will be will we open our hearts. Will we see the folks that come through our doors as a cause in need of our charity? Will we see these folks as a problem that we are fixing?

Or will we see them as a gift from God to be cherished – as people like us – who have hopes and dreams for the future? Will we see their being here as an opportunity for us to be generous – giving the best of what we have to offer – the best of our time – our effort – the best of our talent?

There are three things that each of us can do to begin in very tangible ways to ‘care for the poor’.

- 1) Attend the Poverty Workshop on April 30 here at Echo Hill in order to learn about some of the cultural difference that often separate us from those who are poor.
- 2) Call Helping Hands Ministry (Lois Rude) or the Ecumenical Center (Marvalee Vuichard) and arrange for a visit to find out the multitude of programs that they offer in cooperation with other agencies to care for the poor in Cedar Rapids. See if there is a way you can be a part of one of those.

3) Sign up to help out with the Family Promise when it begins. Volunteer to be the overnight host, to fix a meal, to come and to be community with our guest, to organize games or to simply make people feel welcomed.

I am going to say something a little different here. May these things – not be about them – but may they be about us – about us remembering our common humanity and about us learning to love our neighbor by sharing ourselves with them. Amen.