

“Going To Where The Hurt Is”

Mark 2:18-22; Matthew 6:16-18; Isaiah 58:3-12

2/27/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Did you ever have someone come up to you and say, “Why is it that you don’t do it this way at your church, like we do at ours?” It happened to Jesus one day. In the Mark 2 passage that was read, Jesus is openly criticized for not having His followers fast – like the followers of John the Baptist and the Pharisees.

Fasting was originally used in Judaism during times mourning for the dead but eventually it was used to show regret for one’s sins. Judaism had built fasting into their tradition of observance of the sacred holidays. It was an attempt to be pious, a form of worship that could be done at home and during the week.

The practice of going without food was even observed by members of the Qumran commune¹ – where it was likely that John the Baptist was a member. And the more John the Baptist got around, the more followers he had – most of whom were taking in his teachings about living a simplified lifestyle. Pharisees fasted regularly. Jesus fasted for 40 days in a contemplative period in the wilderness prior to beginning His mission. He laid down rules for it but always emphasized that it was to be an act of devotion – the act itself being not as important as the devotion behind it.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, fasted every Monday and Thursday. They maintained this practice with many other daily rituals – trying to put their religious expression into a routine that they could do almost without thinking about it. There is some merit to rituals and habits – like kissing your spouse regularly – it doesn’t hurt.

Long before Jesus’ time, people apparently got frustrated when God wasn’t paying enough attention to how religious they were acting. Our responsive

¹ The religious sect that maintained Old Testament Biblical scrolls and observed a strict monastic lifestyle of celibacy. Their collection of scriptural scrolls and rules for their commune was discovered in the so-called “Dead Sea Scrolls” in 1947.

reading, earlier in the service, was written by Isaiah,² essentially scolding the people of his times for completely missing the point – for confusing religion and ritual with true spirituality.³ The critics of Jesus, as well, were missing the point in complaining about Jesus’ followers’ apparent lack of concern for fasting.

Jesus told them that they ought to be celebrating, not fasting, ‘because the bridegroom had arrived.’ Of course, He was using the marriage celebration metaphor to mean that there is a wedding of God and people going on (in His presence) and people should be happy – the Messiah had arrived. The time to fast and mourn will come soon enough (and He was clearly referring to His coming torture and death).

Jesus went on, saying ‘You don’t want to sew new cloth on an old garment. If it shrinks, it will pull itself away from the older material. You don’t put new wine into old wineskins or the old skins will burst in the fermentation process.’ So the Pharisees’ dreadful fasting was like professional mourners heading for a funeral and getting the wrong address and showing up at a wedding reception.

Instead of these religious leaders rejoicing that something new was happening for the good, they critically attacked Jesus’ followers. He wasn’t fitting into the ways they’ve always been doing religion.

Today we might ask ourselves how *we* could avoid getting stuck in a pattern of routine religion and habitual religious behavior – actions for the sake of appearances. A colleague of mine once suggested that perhaps today’s version of fasting is public jogging.⁴ Why is it that when we jog, we often choose to run down crowded streets rather than the less busy roadways and paths? Why is it that every time some people go on a diet, the whole world has to know about it? Perhaps, in a sense, we’re looking over our

² Isaiah 58:3-11

³ Isaiah 58:3-12

⁴ It was Rev. Kay Woike, minister of Nativity United Church of Christ in Tonawanda.

shoulder and asking “Am I good enough, . . . am I doing all right?”

Some people in our culture are pretty good at being noticeably religious. Perhaps there are some of them in your family clan. Perhaps there are others you know from other social circumstances.

The kind of fasts I want, God said, are these: to remove the yoke of injustice and let the oppressed people free. I want you to share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless and poor. You’ve got to give your clothing to the people who have nothing to wear and don’t refuse to help even your own relatives, for goodness sakes.

Being one who follows Jesus has always meant to do what Jesus taught and did Himself. Jesus was always trying to get people free from what was imprisoning them. He always went to where the hurt is and tried to do something about it. The same responsibility is ours today. This is a very simple, straight-forward and practical lesson. Going to where the hurt is means dealing directly with needs people have in their personal lives.

Think about the history of God’s people for a minute, if you will. Christians have usually been involved in trying to help out the people who were being hurt or oppressed. One good example was William Wilberforce.

Bill was an English man and he gathered a few of his Christian friends and founded a group to figure out how to get rid of the (then legal) human slave trade. He was called a “do-gooder” but he and his friends eventually abolished slavery in all of the British commonwealths around the world. Later on in that 19th century, Christians in our own country got working, took tremendous personal risks and ended that kind of horrible oppression.

We have seen in history how Christians have gotten together and tried to end injustices directed against women. By now, most of those injustices have been abolished because of the efforts of Christians who had pulled together and applied the equalizing justice taught by Jesus and Paul. So basic to the core of Christian beliefs and convictions is an effort to seek out the hurt and the pain of individuals.

It tries to dismantle the individual and institutional power distributions that cause injustice. The central focus of Christianity is not interested in mere ritual and tradition for appearances or success. If you summarized all of the Old Testament prophets, and tried to capture the essence of the way Jesus lived and taught – it would come down to simply doing something about the pain in life. All of Christianity quickly and practically comes down to stopping injustice, sharing and healing the pain. Unfortunately it’s the exact opposite of the direction of the entire culture in which we’re living. This is why.

If we think that getting the white house with the picket fence, the automatic lawn sprinklers, walk-in clothes closets (with a year’s salary worth of clothing), cars that cost as much as a house used to cost, and enough money in stocks to generate an affluent income until after you die, . . . if we think that dream has anything to do with Christianity, you haven’t read the Bible. The so-called ‘American Dream’ is not the dream of Jesus – it’s the Christian’s nightmare. Making those things your life’s goal will give you divorce, alienation from everyone you know, cause increased suffering on the part of people with whom you’re not sharing and an early trip to the grave. If you don’t buy that, maybe it’s time you sat down and read through the life and teachings of Jesus; . . . it’s been a few years, hasn’t it?⁵

Most of us know, by the time we’ve reached this point in our life, that there are two things we’ve had to do if we wanted to grow as a person. The two things necessary for learning and growth are ❶ risk and ❷ change. To state this in a different way; if, in running your own company for the last ten years, you haven’t risked trying something different; and when you saw something that wasn’t working or meeting needs or was alienating customers; and you haven’t changed the way you’re doing things, you haven’t grown. In fact, if that is actually true of your business, you’ve probably lost it by now.

The two things necessary for learning and growth in your closest relationship are also ❶ risk and ❷ change. To state this in a different way; if you went

⁵ Try starting with the gospel of Luke.

about your most important relationship for the last ten years and haven't risked trying something different; and when you saw something in your behavior or that of your partner that wasn't working, and if you've seen your needs or the needs of your partner not being met, or if one or both of you have become alienated, and you haven't changed the way you're doing things, you haven't grown. Like the human body and its complex interdependency between its systems, if your relationship doesn't grow and regenerate, it dies.

The two things necessary for learning and growth in this particular church are also ❶ risk and ❷ change. To state this in a different way; if, for the last ten years, we've gone about the way we worship, engaged in projects for mission and related to one another and visitors and we haven't risked trying something different; and when we've seen something in what we're doing that wasn't inviting people to join us in our work and worship; if we've had needs or seen the needs of others not being met; and even if some others have been alienated; and if we haven't changed the way we're doing things appropriately in response, we haven't grown. You get the pattern.

For what kinds of needs was Jesus suggesting we watch and act upon? The answer to that is to turn away from looking at the communion table in the front of the church in order to look right in the faces of the people in our lives.

You don't have to lift your eyes very far to see that right in the bulletin are simple needs listed on a page. You can't get more straightforward than that. Can you help?

Look over at the list of people for whom we are praying. How about spending a few minutes talking with God about the known and unknown things going on in their lives.

How about people you've seen just these past few weeks. Consider the person who lives a few houses down. Did you give them a hand with the snow? Do you bother to say 'hi' when you passed? You may have no idea how warmly connecting it is when someone knows your name and greets you on the street when you live alone and all you've got is the constant impersonal chatter of the TV and radio.

If they died this afternoon, would they recognize you when you crossed over when your time comes?

Where is the hurt in life that God has shown you recently? If you are living with another person, do you know what may be affecting their feelings about life right now? How about holding up on some of the mammoth amounts of energy you're putting into something *you* like to do – and putting it, instead, toward something that will directly make a difference in helping this person out whom you love? Funny how we try to be super heroes around the neighborhood and at work but we never do any of our magic for the closest people in our lives.

So next Sunday, when you look back at how you lived your life this week, what will you see? Will you have seen the pain and hurt that isn't very far from where you live? Will you have extended yourself to do anything about it in response?

Sometime soon, today, slow down and stop for a minute. What can you risk doing different that you haven't yet done? What will you change? Your answer to those two questions will be how you've personally grown this week. Are you going to grow? ■