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Isaiah 58  
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### Pursuing Social Justice

"In 1914, not long after the sinking of the *Titanic*, Congress convened a hearing to discern what happened in another nautical tragedy. In thick fog off the Virginia coast, the steamship *Monroe* was rammed by the merchant vessel *Nantucket* and eventually sank. Forty-one sailors lost their lives. While the captain of the *Nantucket* was on trial, it was determined that the steering compass for the hit vessel was as much as two degrees from the standard magnetic compass. That captain said his instrument was within the allowable deviation for the trade though he never attempted to adjust it in the one year he was the master of the *Monroe*.

He knew there was a problem and did nothing to correct it.

The reminder for us is this: if the heart is like a compass ... then we need to (regularly) calibrate our hearts, tuning them to be directed to the Creator, our magnetic north."<sup>1</sup>

God's people have always struggled having our hearts in tune with the Creator. That's what the Prophet Isaiah calls out in our scripture today with regards to social justice and living generously. He says, "There is a disconnect between what you said you believed and what you are actually doing." Our compass is a few degrees off...and we are missing the mark.

In light of what we've been talking about these past few weeks about living generously, I believe that we are to be a people who regularly calibrate our compasses in worship and try our best to do the right thing. Not that we are always going to hit the bullseye dead center each time. But that we try our best and lean hard into God's grace.

Listen now as I read from Isaiah 58 as God calibrates Israel's moral compass.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

In January, I am excited to be offering once again Our Parenting with Love and Logic Classes. The essence behind this parenting philosophy is that we want our children to grow up knowing that there are consequences to their choices and behaviors. We want our children to learn that when they make good choices, it goes well with them and others. When they don't, it makes life much harder in return. And we want them to learn this when they are young when the

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<sup>1</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Brazos Press, 2016), page 20 posted on Preaching Today Website at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?query=isaiah%2058&type=&start=41>

consequences are small...as opposed to learning it as an adult...when the consequences are much bigger.

For example, if we learn to put our toys away as kids, they don't get broken or misplaced. Because as we get older, we know that the cost of not putting our things away properly goes up. They get broken or stolen and are much harder and expensive to replace.

The words we just heard from Isaiah remind us of that consequence based learning.

God says, "If you do this, then this will happen."

Clearly Isaiah says that Israel's heart was in the right place, but their actions didn't follow. There was a disconnect between what they said they wanted and what they actually did. As a result, their compasses were just a little bit off and there would be consequences for not getting back into tune with God's heart.

God says, "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

In other words, "Dude. Live the life you profess 24/7 and not just one day of the week."

But how? And what does God actually require of us?

The Prophet Micah states, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what the Lord requires of you. To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah expounds upon that a bit more.

Loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke.

Set the oppressed free and break every yoke.

Share food with the poor.

Provide the poor wanderer with shelter.

Clothe the naked.

To not turn away from our own flesh and blood.

But what does it mean today?

Loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords that bind them. This has me thinking of the many "isms in our culture." Such as racism or the idea that people are treated unequally because the color of their skin. Classism that people are treated worse based on their real or perceived socio-economic status. Sexism that others are considered the weaker sex based on their gender.

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<sup>2</sup> Micah 6:8

Ageism or discrimination or unfair treatment based on a person's age. Elders are often overlooked for employment, restricted from social services, marginalized, or excluded from their communities.

Human trafficking which is the action of illegally transporting people from one country or area to another, typically for the purposes of forced labor or commercial sex exploitation. There are an estimated 40.3million people worldwide who are enslaved through human trafficking.

These are big problems that aren't easily solved and it's easy to get overwhelmed knowing how to step into them. Isaiah tells us to set the oppressed free and break every yoke.

The Talmud which is the Jewish body of civil and ceremonial law states, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Share our food with the poor. We do that through our FISH offering each month as we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries which goes to support the local food bank, providing FISH Food, bringing healthy snacks for families in need at Silver Star Elementary School, growing fresh produce for the Clark County Food Bank through the Churches in Partnership Community Garden, sponsoring children through Compassion International, World Vision, or New Hope Ministry in Honduras.

To provide the poor wanderer with shelter.

The Jewish Torah contains over fifty references to the resident stranger... general admonitions not to harm the stranger, along with the positive exhortations to provide the stranger with basic food and clothing, with prompt payment of wages, and legal justice.

God tells the Israelites in Exodus "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress them, for you were aliens in Egypt."<sup>3</sup> "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>4</sup>

In Leviticus. "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."<sup>5</sup>

In Deuteronomy, "You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 22:21

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 23:9

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 10:19

“You shall not hate an Egyptian, for you were stranger in his land.”<sup>7</sup>

“Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.”<sup>8</sup>

How do these verses speak to the flood of people traveling up through Central America or walls we raise to secure our borders?

Rabbi Barry Schwartz talks about creating a moral memory. In other words, looking back over our own lives and remembering those times when we suffered injustice. This can either make us vengeful or empathetic. Schwartz argues that the Torah leads us to be more empathetic. That that was God’s intent. To create a people who would be empathetic toward others who likewise were looking for a new home and not turn them away.

In 1911, my great grandfather left his wife and unborn son in Naples, Italy to immigrate to the United States of America. A land that offered our family a better opportunity and life than we would have had back in Italy at the time. I don’t believe that my grandfather met his son until he was seven years old when he and my great grandmother finally came to America. I can’t imagine how hard that must have been. Certainly, it’s not an easy decision to make.

How many of us have similar immigrant stories embedded in our moral memory? Unless we are Native American, every single one of our hands should be raised.

How does that make us feel knowing that those trying to reach our borders today are only wanting the same thing as our ancestors wanted. I realize that this is a hot political topic that we often don’t agree on what is the right thing to do. But we must acknowledge that for some reason God was very intentional to make sure his words were preserved for us today so that we could calibrate our moral compass.

When we see the naked to cloth them. I think of people who are vulnerable and without protections to help themselves Children, youth, and vulnerable adults. At Cascades we have our Safe Church Policy which spells out the policies we’ve put into place to protect such folks. I also think about students in Clark County that are housing, food, or resource insecure. These are children in our own community who are stuck in the grips of poverty through no choice of their own but are victims of their parent’s poor choices. Our Benevolence Board is currently supporting the Family Community Resource Centers of nine schools in the Evergreen and Vancouver School Districts. We’ve partnered with those districts and the Council for the Homeless to create a pool of resources for families in crisis

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<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 23:8

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 24:22

can request up to 25% of their housing need in a one time grant to prevent them from becoming homeless all together.

And this week, we've met with the administrations at Heritage, Prairie, and Evergreen High Schools to learn more about how we can be a support to their school communities as well.

The last item that Isaiah mentions in his call for us to pursue justice is to not turn away our own flesh and blood. Again this also is a tricky topic that isn't always so cut and dry. But we must take heed of the Apostle Paul words to Timothy, "If anyone does not provide for their relatives, and especially for members of their own household, they have denied the faith and are worse than unbelievers."<sup>9</sup>

But the call to live generously through our pursuit of social justice didn't just come from Old Testament prophets.

In Matthew 25, Jesus described what it would be like at the end of times and when we are held accountable for what we did or didn't do in our lives. To those who followed through, Jesus said, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we do these things for you?"

Jesus answered, "Whatever you do for the least of these brothers and sisters, you did for me."<sup>10</sup>

That is living generously.

Now let's be clear that our motive is very important as we pursue social justice.

We don't do this to earn our way to heaven. Faith in Jesus is all that scripture asks for that. We do this in response to what Jesus has done for us. When we were hungry, he fed us. When we were naked, he clothed us. When we were down, he lifted us up. Again it taps into our moral memory. We pursue social justice because it is the right thing to do.

We also don't do this with an arrogant attitude as if we know what is best for someone else. Our denomination which has a heart for social justice has at times

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Timothy 5:8

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 25:31-46

gotten itself into serious trouble assuming that we knew best on very complex international issues...and then had to backpedal because we were wrong.

My friends, when we pursue social justice, we do it with a sense of humility. With a posture of listening to the real needs of those seeking justice, not our perceived needs. This is the approach of our Benevolence Board. We never assume that we know what a school community needs. We always meet with them first and listen, and then allow them to submit a grant request. Because the best solutions come from those who have the problem. Another Parenting with Love and Logic nugget of truth. This class is going to be great so don't miss it!

We also don't do this to satisfy our needs. We don't do this to make us feel good about ourselves. Nor should we ever project our needs onto others. We do this with others in mind. Considering their need for justice as important as our own.<sup>11</sup>

And finally, we don't do this in our strength. We pursue social justice knowing that we are imperfect, cracked jars of clay through whom God has chosen to work.

If we pursue social justice in this way. Then the words of Isaiah will come true.

Our light will break forth like the dawn.  
The Lord will answer us, guide us, and satisfy our needs.  
We will be like well watered gardens, like springs that never fail.  
The best years of our lives will be upon us.  
We will find our true joy in the Lord.

Our compass will point true north once again.  
And we will live generously.

How is God calling us to act justly today? Let's do it!

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<sup>11</sup> Philippians 2:3

