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November 22, 2026

Isaiah 58:1-10

Shout out; do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they want God on their side.
“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day
and oppress all your workers.
You fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, “Here I am.”
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

As we wrap up our series on Spiritual Disciplines, we find ourselves reflecting on Service and Mission, and we explore these practices with a text from Isaiah. (SLIDE) Isaiah is one of 17 Old Testament books that get classified or organized as Prophetic Writings. Isaiah is one of five that get grouped together as the Major Prophets, primarily because it is longer than some of the other short prophetic books.

The main role of prophetic voices was to serve as a messenger from God to the people of Israel, often to correct a societal misstep or direction. The ancient prophets were paying attention to injustice, and drawing people back to a pathway when they had lost their way.

A bit of historic context here - Isaiah 58 is part of the the third and final section of this book, and it is said to have been written during Israel's return from exile. Last week we talked about the temple throughout history; we might think of this prophetic voice speaking to the people as Israel is rebuilding the temple after its destruction, and trying to make sense of the chaos of their recent history.

In these verses, the Prophet is speaking to people who *on the surface* at least, are doing everything well. They are seeking God, and moving through religious practices known to bring people closer to the divine. They are doing things like pursuing God, fasting, and moving through the world with a posture of humility.

But Isaiah notices that they are missing the mark when it comes to service and mission.

It's not hard to think of folks who are well-intentioned, but miss the deeper truth. History is filled with explorers (SLIDE) intent on discovering new lands and possibilities, only to find that what they've done instead is introduced viruses and practices that decimate native indigenous peoples and land. Scientists in Australia imported the Cane Toad (SLIDE) in the mid 1930s to try and fight a problem with sugar cane beetle infestation, only to discover that the toads didn't care for the beetles, instead becoming one of the most devastating invasive

species on the continent to this day. And during the Salem Witch Trials, (SLIDE) faith and community leaders tried to protect their community by rounding up and torturing questionable women accused of witchcraft, often with very questionable grounds for doing so.

All of these are examples of good intentions, with painful and destructive outcomes.

In our own Christian tradition we should look no further than our lengthy history of mission work. Borrowing on New Testament passages encouraging people of faith to spread the Gospel message and invite people to Christ, there are countless stories of the ways this has gone badly. (SLIDE) Peaceful missionary movements transitioned to violent state-sanctioned conquest and crusades. Well-intentioned Christians have used aggressive tactics, including food and healthcare, as a way to manipulate people toward embracing Christianity. Even here in our own backyard, there are old stories of campus ministries at Penn State that offered food and housing to vulnerable students, if only they first go to a Bible study or convert to the Christian tradition of that particular ministry.

But even in more open minded congregations and spaces where we lead with love, we can stumble in our own unique way.

Back in the summer of 2019, (SLIDE) I was attending the biannual Mennonite Church USA convention in Kansas City to lead a workshop and act as a delegate for our congregation. As in previous years, questions were being asked about how we live with each other despite theological differences at a denominational level. An effort was made by some clergy friends to highlight the historic lack of inclusion of LGBT voices at the denominational level. A few of us had the great idea to put forth a new mission - to start circulating a petition asking the denomination to formally recognize the ongoing and decades-long work of Brethren and Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests, by making them an officially recognized advocacy branch of the system.

Our intentions were noble; we believed this would offer a permanent seat at the decision-making table, and give voice to underrepresented congregants and clergy. And much to our surprise, there seemed to be some traction for this idea among the delegates. “Yes,” was the primary feedback as we started circulating

our petition. “Let’s establish this group in the same way we’ve historically done for Mennonite education and healthcare, Mennonite Women, various ethnic groups, our peacebuilding initiatives, and even our Mission Network.

What we didn’t expect was pushback from our LGBT siblings. “Hold on,” many of them said, “what about *our* hopes and desires?” Some argued that Brethren and Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests, as well as groups like Pink Menno, and the Inclusive Pastors Network were much stronger and able to be more vocal as networks *separate* from the institution. Officially structuring their work inside MCUSA would come with denominational oversight, paperwork, and a whole host of other possible restrictions. At one point someone pulled me aside and very kindly pointed out that the endeavor was primarily being led by people with privilege - mostly straight, white, male clergy, just like me. (SLIDE)

Oops. Foiled by our own best-laid plans.

What we had failed to do was a missional blunder so common it is almost comical in hindsight. We needed to start with a posture of listening *first*, with an agreed upon action coming second.

In the years since then, I’m happy to report that Brethren and Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests is still functioning well, and as was their preference, *outside* of our official denominational structures. And with the wave of support from allies, and with the affirmation of LGBT folks, Mennonite Church USA now does include the Queer Leadership Coalition alongside other gender constituency groups within our structures. Even MCUSA was eventually able to overcome and navigate the nearsighted advocacy of guys like me.

(SLIDE) Mission and service, without first exploring and listening, has a tendency to go very wrong. And as we can see from this Isaiah passage, as well as other biblical stories, those who blindly push forward without listening often see their plans fall by the wayside.

There is this other element of the Isaiah passage that we don’t spend much time discussing with each other - what does it mean when our practices are done for selfish reasons, rather than with practices that lead us to a posture of truly serving the actual needs of those around us? Whether we are thinking locally or

globally, if our faith practices are done only for self-gratification, short term rewards, or for the crowns waiting for us in heaven, we've probably lost the point, even before we begin to serve.

(SLIDE) True service, true mission, calls us to step back, listen deeply, and align our actions with the genuine needs of those around us rather than our own predefined solutions. Our actions are not meant to build up our own self-esteem, or heavenly reward, but to build a better future for all. When we root our mission in humility and attentive presence, we move closer to the transformative fast described by Isaiah—one that unties yokes of injustice and allows true healing and light to break forth.

(SLIDE) I think we intuitively have already bought in to this as a church. Good listening practices were what led to endeavors like starting Park Forest Preschool, the local Ten Thousand Villages effort, and 3rd Way Collective. Even the posture in how we use our building beyond Sunday morning is in part because we've been trying to listen to the needs of our broader community. Many of you serve selflessly in the community in a variety of different ways beyond the list of agencies we support as a congregation - perhaps more ways than any of us could actually ever name. Dozens of you have served abroad in a wide variety of mission endeavors to create a more sustainable world. And of course this morning we've already been reminded about Karl Bartsch's lived example, and the important ongoing work of NARPI.

(SLIDE) Just last week, as parents shared about the challenges of having young children in our worship services last week, my initial reaction was to think that we needed to come up with a quick solution. But then I remembered that we are a church who understands that listening well is part of any healthy first step toward a new vision for who we can be as we serve each other. Jumping in with a quick fix may or may not create more meaningful worship experiences. Taking time to do this right is a healthier way to live out our mission as we serve each other.

I hope we continue to carry this practice forward as we seek to serve our world - not pushing forward with our assumptions of what the best path should be, but intentionally hearing from those we hope to serve.

(SLIDE) It can be challenging for those of us in positions of power or privilege to not take over the planning, organizing, and implementation right away. Many of us love to lead by serving others. And yet we know that sometimes moving with intentionality is far more meaningful than pushing ahead quickly.

(SLIDE) May we continue forward with soft hearts, open ears, and a renewed commitment to walk alongside one another in humility and grace. May we be called to the Spiritual Disciplines of Service and Mission not out of obligation or reward, but because we believe deeply that serving the global community is at the heart of a deeper faith and a better world.

As we conclude this series, let us carry forward a commitment to practice our faith not just through outward ritual, but through open hands and receptive hearts. May our service be marked by authentic relationship, willing listening, and a shared journey toward God's justice and peace.

Amen