

“Enough with the bull!”

Isaiah 1:10-17

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline | Sermon for Sunday, September 26, 2021

¹⁰ Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² When you come to appear before me,^[a]
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
¹³ bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,

rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

With that reading, we continue our recentering ourselves on some of the practices that ground us in our faith. Many of you have been reading the Adam Hamilton book *The Walk*, from which this series takes its inspiration. We started the series by encouraging prayer and worship participation. So far, I've been really good at being at worship, and I've been doing so-so at praying five times a day. I'm working on it though. Last week Charlie talked about listening for the voice of God, and I hope that you have found the time to listen through: scripture, silence, other people, or the beauty of creation. After a long time in the wilderness, in our continued trek through the wilderness, these are some of the ways that we are working to get back on track. As we wander together, we may not find the exact path, and we certainly won't follow it perfectly, but by trying to engage in these practices we can at least orient ourselves in the same direction.

And today the practice suggested by Adam Hamilton is "serve." Serve. Like Jesus said, "the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves."²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." This model of servanthood was demonstrated by Jesus when he washed the disciples' feet at the last supper. Serve is an essential Christian practice, given to us through the witness of the prophets and the instruction of our Lord.

So you can see it's a pretty big deal. But wow, does Isaiah ever underscore how big of a deal it is. The passage starts with some pretty strong words from God. "Trample my courts no more", "I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity", "Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen".

So what does that mean? I guess it means worship and prayer is worthless, so you're all dismissed for the day, never come back here again.

No, that's not it.

But it does mean that we need to have a good reason for worship and prayer. Solemn assemblies, of which this could count (though hopefully less solemn),

with iniquity are unendurable for God. But that doesn't rule out every solemn assembly. Our prayers and worship have value still, but we need to be mindful of why we're doing these things. We can't do this mechanically. We can't do it just because we're supposed to. We need to be the church that God tells us to be. We need to be a church of transformation, justice, and servanthood.

If the church is going to do anything in the world, we need to be different coming out of it than going in. Now, I don't necessarily mean today. Today may not be the day anyone changes. But being part of this community—worshipping a God whose primary focus is service to the poor, oppressed, dispossessed—needs to make us better than we were. The act of worshipping again and again should add up. This is an accumulation of a lifetime of worship directed towards God; to God who hates our solemn assemblies; to God who has had enough of our burnt offerings of rams; who is sick of the fat of fed beasts; who is tired of the constant stream of bull.

If we're worshipping and that worship does not turn us towards servanthood, then what are we doing? If we spend our lives praying and it only calcifies those things that keep us from loving our neighbor, then what are we doing? If we're reading the Bible and it's only reinforcing our preconceived notions about people, about systems, about power, then why? Why bother? To worship, pray, and study without being drawn irresistibly towards service means that we're ignoring a fundamental piece of what it means to love our God.

The prophet Micah asks us, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God"?

When asked, Jesus told us what the greatest commandment of all is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.

If we love God, and we take this love seriously, then our gratitude and love leads us to pursue God's passions. And God is passionate about serving our neighbor, especially those who find themselves on the outside.

The question that I want to be on the front of my mind when I consider my

faith is “so what?” I believe in God, great. I believe that the resurrection has proven that God is stronger than death and evil. I believe that the Holy Spirit is present in times of great need. I believe that God is there for me. Great.

So. What.

Who cares? If I’m the only one benefitting from my belief in God, that means I have a pretty small God.

The ‘so what’ of our faith does not need to shatter the foundations of mountains. The ‘so what’ of our faith doesn’t need to be publicly and openly recognized. If your ‘so what’ is that you gave someone your time when no one else would, your worship honors God. If your ‘so what’ means that one person is less hungry, then your prayers honor God. If your ‘so what’ means that someone feels safer today than they did yesterday, then you show honor to God.

As a person and as a people we need to be able to answer the question of ‘so what’. We’re worshipping back in person and donuts are back in the courtyard! We’re able to livestream our worship now! We’re meeting in small groups to talk about God together! These are good things. These are things that I value. These are things that I trust God values. And I believe this because there is a ‘so what’ attached to those things. Because we work as a people to define our ‘so what’.

Next week we’re collecting snacks to give to the teachers who work at Glenn Stephens. So go ahead and bring some snacks for these people who work in a difficult field. Through the month of October we are collecting books to benefit the Madison Reading Project and Wisconsin Books for Prisoners. Bring in books that can be used to help children and our incarcerated neighbors.

Or don’t. I don’t really care if you do that. I mean, I do, but only in a professional capacity and because I believe in these causes.

If the question of ‘so what’ means that you’re going to work with Habitat for Humanity, or the Dane County Humane Society, or Just Dane, or Centro Hispano or any other organization that serves God’s creation then go and do that. The so what of being who we are does not need to be in any proscribed way, but it just needs to be in a way that serves God somehow. Where are

some other places you could go to serve God? This is not a rhetorical device meant to provoke introspection. I want to know, so shout out some names. Maybe you'll hear about something you've never heard of before.

It doesn't need to be extravagant. The small acts are huge as well. Adam Hamilton encourages us to serve one another through simple acts of kindness. His charge towards the readers of the book is to try to engage in five acts of kindness throughout your day. I think this is a good start. It's worth trying. Let the kindness you do work on your heart, lead you to greater and greater service. Be transformed by the kindness you internalize.

Prayer is good. Worship is good. Listening for God is good. None of those things need to ever go away or lose their importance. But we need to make sure we mean it. We need to make sure that we are transformed by the God who made us, loves us, and challenges us to love our neighbors. The God whom we worship and serve.

What does God see as the outcome of worship? What does God see as the necessary direction of prayer? When God speaks to us, what are we hearing? Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

When we do that, our offerings become alive. When we do that, we become great through our servanthood.

If you hear one thing today, if nothing else I said matters to you, please, please, please, let this be inscribed on your heart as a guidepost along the way as we learn to serve: Cease to do evil. Learn to do good.