



What Really Matters?
Isaiah 1:10-20
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Washington Street UMC
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Well, good morning! It is truly a joy to be back in worship with you today!

I first want to reiterate my appreciation to you all, and to the Leadership Board, for the gift of time away. The past few months were a life-giving reprieve.

As it was named in April prior to my leave, the intention of my sabbatical was for an honest renewal leave. I turned off all of my work-related email accounts. I deleted my social media accounts from my phone. I created a Renewal Leave specific *Do Not Disturb* feature on my phone, so that my phone would only ring or ping if a few specific individuals texted or called. I woke up every morning with the only task of being to solve the daily Wordle, Quordle, and on occasion, the DuoTrigordle (if you know, you know).

The goal was to do no work – and if I'm being honest, to think and talk about the business of the Church as little as possible (if at all). In replacement of Church-work, I was invited by some members of the Board to play as much golf as possible. I believe it was Grace Richards who put the idea in my head of playing 40 rounds of golf during the three-month leave.

If you know anything about me, you know that I rarely back down from a challenge. So, Grace, challenge accepted and met.

I played a lot of golf. I played some good golf; I played some not so good golf; but I played a lot of golf none-the-less.

Here's the thing about golf: for as much as golf is an individual sport ... that is, even though only you can affect your score ... it is a social game. Though I had the opportunity to play a handful of rounds by myself this summer, by and large, when you play golf, the course pairs you up with others. So, I played golf with a lot of different people. And, being me, I wanted to know about them because ... well, I'm an extroverted sociologist. If I'm going to spend four hours on the golf course with you, I'm going to talk to you; I'm going to want to know who you are and what you do. Here's a few examples of the people I played golf with.

In South Carolina, I played golf with the Executive Director of a Non-Profit that provides college scholarships to low-income students across the state of North Carolina, and her husband, who used to be the CEO for the largest lithium importer in the US. I played golf in North Carolina with one of the founding members of CARMAX, who offered that CARMAX is not an auto dealer, but a retailer who happens to sell cars. I played golf with a father and son who vacation in an RV together, stopping at different campgrounds up and down the East Coast, planning their stops around the golf courses they

can play. And, while I didn't play golf with them, on a visit to the Appalachian Mountains, I talked about golf with a former CFO of Catholic Charities and his wife, who owns her own CPA firm.

People have fascinating stories.

Do you know the problem with learning about everyone else's story? Inevitably, if you ask someone else what they do for a living, they will eventually ask what you do for a living.

Now, I don't know if this is true for people of every profession – perhaps there are other professions that also find this phenomenon to be true – but you can't tell someone you're a Pastor without it leading to a lot of questions, statements, and or discussion about the Church. When you tell someone you're a pastor, you should be prepared for the person to tell you all about their spiritual life, their church, and their pastor. That, or, to have them tell you how much they hate the church and/or why they left the church.

I don't know why I can't, but I really wish I were more accustomed to lying - to just make up a profession when I'm asked what I do. There are definitely days (especially on the golf course) that I just don't want to be honest about what I do, because I don't want to have the conversation that will inevitably follow. Oh, and if someone doesn't ask me about my profession until late in the golf round, which saves me the lengthy conversation about the church, I get to offer absolution over their guilt, because (like most golfers) by the end of the round, they've most likely screamed their fair share of four-letter words after having shanked a shot into the woods, or lost a few balls in a lake.

All that to say, over the past three months, try as I might to avoid conversations about the Church, admittedly, I had quite a few.

As I was thinking early last week about worship for the coming few weeks, many of my summer conversations came flooding back into my mind. In reflecting on these conversations, here in August, I'm going to be raising questions that stem from the many conversations I had with random golfers over the past few months, beginning today with the question, *What really matters?*

This question, *what really matters*, stems in large part from the things people ask me about our church when I tell them I'm a pastor. They want to know a few specific details: how large is the church? How many people come to worship on Sundays? Are you the only pastor? Are you old enough to be the pastor? ... After I answer these questions, they usually tell me about their church. Along with how big their church is, and how much they love their pastor, they also usually offer whether their church is "traditional" or "contemporary," and perhaps include their denominational affiliation. If the person isn't Methodist, it usually leads us down a path where they want to know the differences between their denomination and Methodism. With one person, I had an hour-long conversation about the difference in the 7 sacraments of the Catholic Church and the 2 of the Methodist Church. They couldn't believe that Methodists don't consider important moments, such as Weddings and Confirmation, sacraments.

As I was reading the lectionary text for this morning from Isaiah, these conversations stood out to me.

Our scriptural text in Isaiah comes right at the front of Isaiah's time as a prophet. In fact, to our knowledge, this is the first recorded writing from any of the prophets. Keep in mind, the prophets were used by God to speak to the whole of the people of God. The prophets were not priests preaching in the synagogues. Isaiah was not the pastor of a local congregation. When Isaiah offers critique and praise, the whole of the community of faith was included in the critique and commendation – pastors, laity, parents, children, old, young, wealthy, poor ... they were all the target of Isaiah's instruction.

So, here at the start of the prophetic word – in the first declaration of a prophet to the whole of the community of faith – Isaiah has these words to offer:

“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. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.”

Understanding this is a text that is over 2700 years old, it's not surprising if this text doesn't resonate with us at first. I'm not sure about you, but I've never brought in a slaughtered animal to offer on the altar to God. Scholar Paul Simpson Duke says that we often glance over this text because the practice of such blood sacrifices is so foreign for us. He offers that for us to grasp the significance of this text, it may be best for us to offer Isaiah's prophecy in a more modern vernacular. Duke says Isaiah's critique today would sound more like this: “I hate your worship. Your prayers make me sick. I loathe your music. Your sermons are a sacrilege. Who asked for your offerings. Your Holy Communion stinks. I want none of it.”¹

In this chastisement by God, in the first statement offered through the prophet Isaiah, the first thing God does is say, “I hate the way you worship me.”

I find this critique condemning, because, as I experienced this summer, the thing people seem to care most about when learning about a church is the worship service. Is the music contemporary or traditional? Is the preacher a good preacher? Do a lot of people come? Does the denominational affiliation fit what I am most familiar or comfortable with? Are the sacraments congruent with my understanding of sacraments?

I don't know when this happened, and I'm certainly not exempt from this critique – remember, Isaiah is writing to us all, preacher and congregation as one – but at some point the faith community began to center worship as the primary (if not sole) action that God cared about. Though we no longer offer blood sacrifices on the altar, at least not in our denomination, we've poured our own blood and sweat in into building bigger and more visually appealing sanctuaries. We've worked hard, across denominational lines, to convince people we have the *right* liturgy, the *right* hymns, the *right* hierarchical structure, and the best “worship experience.” We've turned worship into a commodity to be bought, sold, and consumed.

And yet, God speaks through the prophet, saying, “when you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.”

As Isaiah finishes offering God’s critique of these worship practices, there is a word of instruction. Having named all the things that God dislikes, Isaiah shifts to naming the things God *desires*.

Beginning in verse 16, Isaiah offers, “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, please for the widow.”

With this exhortation, it offers clarity around God’s condemnation towards the worship practices God so clearly despises. It is not just that God lacks appreciation for our attempts at worship, it’s that such worship means nothing to God if the life we live beyond synagogue does not reflect the will of God. As Rev. Scott Hoezee summarizes, “People who treat the poor as garbage cannot come to worship the God whose very character says [God] pays attention to those folks most of all. And anybody who thinks that some worship is better than no worship are proven wrong ... God would rather be ignored than praised by people whose very lives are at variance with [God’s] core holiness and goodness.”ⁱⁱ

“Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” I said earlier that Isaiah’s chastisement of worship may sound foreign to us, because our worship practices have changed so much. And yet, it doesn’t feel as if God’s statement of preference needs a super-contemporary translation. Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow. ... These exhortations are heard throughout the biblical text – found in both the Old and New Testaments of our Holy Book. ... We are constantly called on to care for those who are the least powerful in society. We are instructed to give voice to those whose voices are most often ignored among the community. We are told to offer financial and material support for those who do not have the means to care for themselves.

And yet, when we talk about church, when we learn about other churches, when we introduce our church ... we have this condemnable instinct to think that what matters is the quality and size of our worship.

But is that what *really* matters? Is that what God cares about most?

Just once, I’d like to play golf with someone whose first words to me after finding out I’m a pastor is to ask, “How is your church addressing racial inequities in your community?” or “How is your church involved in housing the homeless in Alexandria?” or “How many people from your church regularly speak up at City Council meetings on issues that disproportionately harm your low-income neighbors?”

What really matters?

Just once, just once, I’d like to be mindful enough to ask those questions of them in response.

May the words of the prophet offer us guidance as a people of faith. Amen.

ⁱ Paul Simpson Duke. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Scott Hoezee. “Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 Commentary.” <http://cepreaching.org>. Retrieved August 3, 2022.