

ISAIAH 58:1-8

Shout aloud without restraint; lift up your voice like a trumpet. Call my people to account for their transgression and the house of Jacob for their sins. Although they ask counsel of me day by day and say they delight in knowing my ways, although like nations which have acted rightly and not forsaken the just laws of their gods, they ask me for righteous laws and say they delight in approaching God.

Why do we fast if thou dost not see it? Why mortify ourselves if thou payest no heed? Since you serve your own interest only on your fast-day and make all your men work the harder, since your fasting leads only to wrangling and strife and dealing vicious blows with the fist, on such a day you are keeping no fast that will carry your cry to heaven. Is it a fast like this that I require, a day of mortification such as this, that a man should bow his head like a bullrush and make his bed on sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this what I require of you as a fast: to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knots of the yoke, to snap every yoke and set free those who have been crushed? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, clothing the naked when you meet them and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk? Then shall your

light break forth like the dawn and soon you will grow healthy like a wound newly healed. Your own righteousness shall be your vanguard and the glory of the Lord your rearguard. Then, if you call, the Lord will answer.

MATTHEW 6:1-6;16-21

Be careful not to make a show of your religion before men. If you do, no reward awaits you in your Father's house in heaven. Thus, when you do some act of charity, do not announce it with a flourish of trumpets, as the hypocrites do in synagogue and in the streets to win admiration from men. I tell you this: they have their reward already. No, when you do some act of charity, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing. Your good deed must be secret and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you...

Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth where it grows rusty and moth-eaten and thieves break in to steal it. Store up treasure in heaven where there is no moth and no rust to spoil it, no thieves to break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

INSIDE OUT

Isaiah 58:1-8
Matthew 6:1-6;16-21

We live in a noisy, noisy world—mine probably more than most with 70 trains daily rumbling down the tracks in front of my house. And the world's noise isn't all sound. It is also text messages, tweets, Instagrams and emails. It is Facebook, TV and every sort of media attraction. By clicking-on a key we can be totally immersed in nearly everything that is happening nearly everywhere. And if that is suddenly removed, we feel oddly as if we have been disconnected and lost control of our worlds.

We know there is a problem here, but because we have grown so addicted to the noise, we push aside our concern, promising ourselves that we will cut back on screen time tomorrow. But when tomorrow comes, the Siren Call of the outside world is just too much to ignore and we make another promise for another tomorrow.

What we sacrifice in the service of this all embracing commotion is the interior life where we can access a connection with the Spirit. I do not know of anyone who claims they connected to God through Facebook! But people who take their spirituality seriously—and I count you them because Ash Wednesday draws people who are in it for more than just

show. The Christmas and Easter crowd is not here tonight. So you are here and I therefore have no doubt that moving into the still, small space where God speaks is important to you.

As we embark upon the Lenten season, we are invited to go within. In the ashes, we are reminded that we are dust, that no matter how much energy, excitement and entertainment we find outside of ourselves, that will all continue to go on without us when we are no longer here. Rather, what is eternal must be found on the inside. If we lose ourselves in the world, we lose ourselves. Author Paulo Coelho observed, “(When we move) away from God, we live a fragmented existence. We try to find oneness, but we don’t know the way back...”

But even in our search for oneness, we cannot just go in and stay in. The world is too compelling for that! Because we are born of dust, we are also part of the earth, part of the universe. Each of us has in our bodies dust from the beginnings of time when all things were created. We are thus inseparable from the physical world in which we reside. And when we return to ashes, we return to our origins. We return to God.

In the meantime, we go inside to go outside, to be a force of good in the world: *to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knots of the yoke, to snap every yoke and set free those who have been crushed. Is it not*

sharing your food with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, clothing the naked when you meet them and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk what God requires of us? Do we not need to go inside to understand our true nature first before we go outside to serve the world?

John Wesley said that we are here to do the most good we can for the most people we can for as long as we can. Welcome to Lent.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap March 5, 2025