

“Are you worshipping ‘correctly?’” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
February 5, 2017 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 58: 1-12

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Every year, several members of a very well-to-do congregation in a large city spend a night with homeless people on the street. These Christ-followers do this to identify with those who spend their days and nights suffering from hunger, disease, and rejection. The annual night on the street serves to remind its members of the suffering of the homeless, the need to help the homeless. It reminds the people why the church has a homeless ministry.

Usually, the members of the church spend a night on the streets during the week leading up to Easter – Holy Week. The weather can be unpredictable during that time of year and that year’s chosen night turned out to be quite chilly and rain rolled in around midnight. Wet and tired, the group had been seeking shelter for some time, when they came upon a church that was having an all-night prayer vigil.

As the pastor of this collection of soggy, cold folks stepped through the outer doors of the church having the all-night prayer vigil, a security guard stopped her. She explained to the security guard that she and the rest of the group were Christians and that they had no place to stay and were wet and miserable and would like to rest and pray.

This pastor had forgotten that her wet, matted hair and disheveled clothing left her looking like just another homeless person from the street. The security guard was friendly, but explained with brutal honesty, “I was hired to keep homeless people like you out.” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, v 1, p 318)

I’m sure the church that rejected this ragtag group of ‘homeless’ people was quite pleased with their all-night prayer vigil. I’m sure the members thought they were honoring God and offering appropriate worship to God. But were they?

In today’s scripture reading from Isaiah, we learn that God was not pleased with the worship practices of the Hebrew people. The Israelites fasted and humbled themselves with sackcloth and ashes. They followed all the proper rituals for worship. They did everything prescribed for worship. But God was not satisfied with their worship.

I’ve heard some people say that drums are not acceptable in church worship. Or that contemporary music accompanied by guitar is not truly worshipping God. Usually the person is complaining that the church is not worshipping God with

respect and in the 'right' way. This disagreement over how to worship has become such an issue in all denominations that this question about true worship of God has its own name: the worship wars. After hearing our reading from Isaiah, what do you think God would say about the 'worship wars'?

This is what God says: **Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs 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?** (Isaiah 58: 6-7)

Method or style of worship is not important to God. Worship however you're comfortable. Just don't forget to worship! And don't forget the poor, the homeless, the hungry. That's God's concern. That's God's priority.

I love what Isaiah says happens to each of us when you and I honor this request from God on how to properly worship. The light shines, the light dawns! The Lord guides you and me. The Lord makes us strong. Listen to how Isaiah describes the blessings that will come upon you when you serve those less fortunate. You may recognize this scripture as including if/then statements from God.

If you do all the things I just mentioned, God says (Verses 8 – 12): **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. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

God seeks justice for the poor and oppressed. When you and I do God's will, we are bringing God's light to the world. You and I are offering worship to God as God requires.

Think again about the story at the beginning of this sermon. The light was in the church. The people who needed help were in the darkness. All the church needed to do was let those who walk in darkness share their light. It's that simple. Share your light.