

9 June 2019

Practical Divinity
Isaiah 1:12-17; James 1:27

We read a passage from each testament today. First, Isaiah, chapter 1, verses 12-17:

¹² *When you come to appear before me,
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.*

Then, from the New Testament, just one verse: James 1:27.

²⁷*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

So let's start with Isaiah. Here we read about some things that people do that really, *really* make God angry, then a few things that God would prefer that people did instead. Let's begin with the things that God hates. Among these are: special worship celebrations, offerings, sacrifices, and incense given by people whose lives are filled with sin. *I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.* Furthermore, God can't stand prayers and supplications made by people who habitually oppress others. *I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.* Now, what does God wish for instead? Cleansing ourselves from sin, turning away from evil, acting with justice and compassion, and defending orphans and widows – that is, people who have no one else to defend them. Now, let's compare our verse from the New Testament. What does James say true worship

of God is? *To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.* If you were paying attention, you might have noticed some overlap, a repeated theme. For further evidence of this theme, see me afterwards and I'll show you the relevant passages from Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Proverbs, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and the entire ministry of Jesus. But for now, let's go back to Isaiah. What do we do with this speech?

Well, first let me stress that I don't think it's saying not to worship God. Yes, it says that God hates the people's worship gatherings and offerings and all that, but the reason God hates that stuff is because it is being offered by people who serve only themselves and have no concern for the defenseless and marginalized. What God finds to be a burden is people who come to worship without being open to being transformed by that encounter, so as to go out to serve others. In other words, it sounds as if God hates the same thing that bothers so many others: acting all holy in church, then being completely different people everywhere else. We usually call that "hypocrisy."

Now I need to pause for a moment mid-sermon to talk about that. If the word "hypocrisy" drives you batty, welcome to my world. I have lost count of the people I've talked to who use our hypocrisy as Christians as an excuse to ditch church. "You Christians are all hypocrites." Invariably what they mean is that we don't live up to the ideals and goals that we profess. And they're right. We don't. We talk about loving our neighbors as ourselves, but then we all slip, relapse into selfishness and greed and anger and pettiness. Like every other human being, including the ones who are so self-righteously condemning Christians. In a sense then, we're not being criticized for being worse than anyone else, but for having such high goals that we fall short of them. So, would people prefer that we *aimed* at being selfish and greedy. Then we wouldn't be hypocrites, at least. But that's not good enough. I'm going to continue to set myself the goal of loving others as I love myself – and I'm going to continue to fail. Based on prior experience, frequently. If that makes me a hypocrite, I'll have to live with it, and I hope you all join me in my hypocrisy. It's better than not trying.

But, to go back to Isaiah 1, I think there's another way to look at God's words, a way that avoids the false choice between either achieving moral perfection or being a hypocrite. I think what God's saying is that we must not keep our religious lives in a compartment separate from the rest of our lives. You see, we all have different parts of our lives. We have our family lives, our work lives, our leisure lives, and so on. And yes, we need to maintain some separation between them, for the sake of our own emotional and spiritual health. Our work lives should not constantly invade our family and leisure lives, for instance. We should stop checking work emails at the beach or at dinner with the family. But the one area of our life that must not be walled up in a separate compartment is our faith life. Too many people, both in Isaiah's day and ours, manage to do just that. They have a little box that they keep their faith in, to be opened once a week for a couple of hours of thinking about God and being nice to other church people, before being closed up again – closed and sealed so tightly that no one at the office or the senior center suspects that the faith box even exists.

One way to get at what Isaiah is saying is to say that the faith box must never be closed. It should be open, touching and infusing every other area of our lives. Our connection with God has to influence our lives at work and home and play, and if it doesn't, God is not interested in our shriveled little faith life. To paraphrase Isaiah 1, God is saying, "If this week, you've

neglected your children or betrayed your spouse, don't come sing my praises. Your song is just noise to me. If you've spent this week at work cheating people by selling them products with false promises, don't bring me ten percent of those profits. I don't want it. If you've gone all week stepping over homeless people without noticing them, or complaining about the inconvenience they are to you, don't bother praying. I can't hear you, because I'm listening to the guy under the bridge." What Isaiah – along with James and the rest of scripture – is saying is that there is not to be a religious compartment in our lives. God either inhabits it all or moves on. If you've got a box reserved for God that you only take out on Sundays, I don't know what you actually have in there, but it's not God. God doesn't fit.

I know. That still sounds daunting. Are we only permitted to come into the presence of God when we're perfect? If so, that's really going to hurt attendance by your pastor. But that's not really what I'm saying. I'm saying that we have to tear down the compartment walls and open up all our lives to the slow infusion of God. We may never arrive completely, with every facet of our lives shining God's love, but we can open another dusty cupboard and let God in.

This is what scripture teaches, but it is also particularly our heritage as Methodists. Nearly 300 years ago, our founder – John Wesley – set out to make faith central to every part of the Christian's life. The English church in Wesley's time was about as far from that ideal as you could imagine. No one, not even the priest, was expected to be at church more than an hour a week. Priests were paid, by and large, by wealthy landowners in return for which the church made few demands, and preachers preached comfortable, reassuring sermons. If people were concerned about the poor, they were free to start their own benevolent societies, but the church neither sponsored nor promoted such ministry. Into this placid church, offering placebo faith that made people feel good about themselves without doing anything, stepped the young firebrand John Wesley, alongside his brother Charles and a small group of other ardent souls, determined to make faith a force in changing the world, rather than one slightly boring compartment of the world. They started with themselves, trying to cleanse their own lives with strict and methodical discipline (which is where the name "Methodist" came from), all the while visiting people in prison, feeding the hungry, clothing the ragged. (Remember James 1:27? *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*) As their movement spread, they started small groups to help their followers keep each other accountable and then founded schools and libraries for people who couldn't afford such things. They helped people overcome alcoholism, taught people habits of sound money management, and raised thousands of lives out of ignorance and poverty. Wesley called this mix of internal devotion and external action "Practical Divinity."

It wasn't that these Methodists were a bunch of middle-class do-gooders "helping the poor." It was simply that they believed that their faith was to be more than a weekly box to tick off the to-do list. It was supposed to transform them, and they were supposed to transform the lives of others. Methodists did not then and have not ever lived up to those high goals. We have compromised our ideals so often that I recently taught a four-week class on all the ways we have fallen short. So maybe we're a bunch of hypocrites. I can live with that. But one of the reasons that I am a Methodist today is because we at least have that ideal. Among the Methodists I have found a new home, a place where we believe that faith is supposed to matter every day, every minute, in every area of our lives. I found a place that teaches what the Bible teaches, and I'm a Methodist now. I'm not going back.

This is Pentecost Sunday. When we tell that story of the Holy Spirit coming to fill the church, we tend to focus on the miraculous wind and the flames of fire and the gift of speaking in other's languages and all that. And that stuff is amazing. But there's another way to look at Pentecost, too. It was the Holy Spirit arriving in the church and saying, "All right! Enough with the prayer meeting! Get out in the streets!" That's what Wesley meant by "practical divinity."