

What Does the Lord Require?

Repairers of the Breach

ISAIAH 58:1-12

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Today is the fourth in our sermon series entitled, "What Does the Lord Require?" Steve began the series with the text from Micah 6:8, where the Israelites asked what would please God.

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

Micah tells them, "no." What the Lord wants from us is to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Today's text from the 58th chapter of Isaiah sounds very much the same. The Israelites are proud of how faithful they are in their fasting, but they are indignant that no matter how much they fast or how fully they humble themselves, God does not notice. Like in Micah, the people seem to say, "what do you want from us, O God?"

And through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord responds. Listen now to God's word for the church....

ISAIAH 58:6-12

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? 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 rearguard. 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.

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

Our Reformed tradition teaches us that, to be faithful in our study of God's word, we must keep the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

We have to be keenly aware of what is going on in the world, and as Christians we have the responsibility of always seeing the world through the lens of the Word of God.

Without the newspaper in hand, we risk teaching Scripture that falls flat as an irrelevant history lesson.

Without the Bible in hand, we risk becoming a social service agency that fights battles from our passions rather than from our sense of God's calling.

So, looking at the news...

- Did you know that Memphis has been named the most "food insecure city for children" in the USA. (Urban Child Institute)
- On any given day in the city of Memphis, there are about 2,000 people living without roofs over their heads. (Memphis Union Mission)
- In March of 2016 NBC News reported that a new survey has tabulated numbers of overweight people, inactive people, and incidences of diabetes to find the most obese city in America is Memphis, Tennessee.
- The number of Shelby County residents with diabetes would fill a string of MATA buses along Poplar Ave from downtown Memphis to Collierville. (Shelby Co. Health Dept.)
- If we held a minute of silence for each violent crime in Shelby County from 2004 to 2010, we would not hear a single pin drop for 9 days. (Shelby Co Health Dept.)

And studying the Bible, we hear these words from Isaiah:

Loose the bonds of injustice... let the oppressed go free... share your bread with the hungry...clothe the naked...

And from Micah:

Do justice... love kindness... walk humbly with God.

We see the brokenness around us and we hear God's call to act, and so as God's church gathered in this place, we act — we might struggle and upset people; we don't always get it right, but we do see the brokenness, hear God's call, and seek to respond faithfully.

Fifty years ago, segregation was the news every day. Emmet Till and James Meredith, sanitation workers, and Martin Luther King — and the responses of churches.

In his book *The Last Segregated Hour*, our own Steve Haynes looked at how the southern church faced desegregation. He explains “kneel ins,” where small groups of African Americans (and white supporters) went to local churches to test white churches’ tolerance for racial integration and to gauge where congregations stood on what many viewed as the great moral issue of the day. The visitors were welcomed without fanfare at two Catholic churches, seated in a roped-off section of the sanctuary at First Church of Christ, Scientist, offered taxis to a “Negro Presbyterian Church” by ushers at Idlewild Presbyterian, and arrested outside Bellevue Baptist.

Ok... So we didn’t get it right at first, but Idlewild kept listening for God — **scripture and newspaper**. What’s going on in the world seen through the lens of God’s word.

“Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free....?”

Idlewild has long been known as the church which began the first integrated recreation program in the city. This church brought children and youth of all ages into our building — to play together, to learn about being part of a team, and to win or lose side by side.

Yesterday I witnessed more than one Idlewild basketball game with teams made up of children from all kinds of schools, parts of the city, belief systems, and cheering families.

The Idlewild Recreation Ministry is a shining light in the history of integrating of this church and city — but it was not an easy move. It took struggle; some members left the church; personal stories broke hearts; and disagreements were real.

Idlewild Recreation is a program that some may say we are “proud” of but which was born from some real humility.

God’s people, newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other,
knowing that God created all in God’s image,
knowing that no one person is more valued by God than another,
knowing that Christian people are called to stand up for people who are oppressed.

Today over 300 people a year are part of Idlewild’s very diverse Recreation Ministry, and still people stop me when I wear my Idlewild t-shirt to tell me about their great experiences in the recreation program.

Then, 20 years ago, the news in Memphis was about growing poverty and homelessness. Some churches moved out of the inner city, but Idlewild stayed. And many of you looked around to see people sleeping in bus stops, shivering on the front steps of the church, and asking for money for food.

With the Bible in the other hand, you heard, *“Is this not the fast that I choose... to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house.”*

While some felt afraid of or uncomfortable with poverty and homelessness, the church stepped out and began More Than A Meal. Every Thursday evening (without fail) this church welcomes men, women, and children from all walks of life to gather for a free, homemade dinner. The MORE in More Than A Meal is about relationships.

Guests come in and find a seat with friends. We get to know each other and hear each other’s stories. The church serves guests a hot meal and provides live music. Some guests choose books from the library and others welcome newcomers.

These days we average over 100 people on Thursday nights.

Idlewild’s More Than A Meal makes a difference in the city of Memphis. Some may say we are “proud” of it, but I know More Than A Meal is born out of the faith of many humble hearts. Serving MTAM reminds us that we are all in this life together; we may look different but our hearts love and hurt in the same ways; and our faith is inspired by each other.

One of the founding members of More Than A Meal still gets teary when she sees a lonely, homeless person, and she says, “that could be my child. I pray someone would feed her if she was down on her luck.”

If we only looked at the newspaper, we’d surely feel hopeless...

Racism still tears apart lives---even today there are children who do not want to be on a team with children of other backgrounds.

Poverty and homelessness still ooze through the fibers of the city---too many people sleeping in doorways, asking for money at red lights, going to bed hungry.

If we just look at the world around us, we will eventually been ground down, burned out, resentful, or hopeless.

BUT — When we look at the world around us *through the lens of God’s word*, we know that God hasn’t given up on creation. We can’t fix the brokenness of the world, so we have no other option than to trust that God can.

That’s what being humble is all about... knowing we can’t make the world right and we can’t give up. Walking humbly with God is — knowing we can’t make the world right but holding hope that God can.

William Sloane Coffin says, *“Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If your heart’s full of hope, you can be persistent when you can’t be optimistic. You can keep the*

faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing.”

So here Idlewild is — newspaper in one hand/Bible in the other. Brokenness, anger, hurt, violence, dishonesty, fear....

You shall be called repairers of the breach, restorer of the streets to live in.

But we do not just look at the newspaper. We are people with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other, always seeking to see the world through the lens of God’s call.

We hold on to the words from Isaiah:

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 will be like noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, ... and you shall be like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

For the past 10 years or so, as Idlewild has held the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other, we have discerned God calling the church to a new way of living faithfully in the city. The Session of Idlewild determined a number of years ago that our newest outreach ministry focus should be “children and families in our community.”

The newspaper tells us that children and families in Memphis are struggling with issues ranging from poverty to addiction, loneliness to grief, isolation to oppression.

- More teen pregnancies,
- more still-born babies,
- more children growing up in poverty,
- more single parent households,
- more families living too far apart to be able to support each other,
- more schools failing,
- more addiction,
- more divorce.

And we’ve studied the news of the groundbreaking national ACE study, which asks adults to identify any “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs) they faced growing up. The study, which was initially done by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente, asked 1700 adults to identify if they had any of these experiences as they grew up: Violence? Divorce? Chronically ill adult? Addiction? Death? For each experience they faced, the responders received one ACE.

67% of those studied had at least one adverse childhood experience.
One in eight of those studied had four or more ACEs.

That wasn't the end of the study, though. Next they studied the health records of the same responders. It turned out that the number of ACEs someone has directly impacts their life long health. The study found that a person with four or more ACEs is...

- 12.2 times as likely to attempt suicide,
- 7.4 times as likely to consider himself alcoholic,
- 4.6 times as likely to suffer from depression,
- 1.9 times as likely to have cancer.

So there is proof-positive that children's earliest experiences impact them both emotionally and physically for the rest of their lives.

It is terrible news. Our healthcare system is already a mess and the adverse experiences children are having today will surely overload it completely.

Addiction is already taking the lives of young people, and the adverse experiences children are having today will amplify that number.

In 2013 the Tennessee Department of Education reported that one in 11 high school students surveyed attempted suicide sometime within the previous year.

The news says that adverse childhood experiences are and will continue to threaten the health and life of people and our community.

Idlewild Church will keep offering welcome and opportunities for inclusion and play. We will keep feeding people who are hungry and clothing people who are cold.

Yet all the while, children right here are having experiences that may prevent them from succeeding in school, from staying sober, from being healthy in mind and body.

A physician friend tells me that the first thing you learn in public health classes is that, if 100 children drink from the same well and 80 get sick, you should keep treating the symptoms of nausea AND you MUST go look in that well to find out what is making them sick.

Not just some, but MANY children and families in our city are struggling and suffering. Not just families "out there" but also families right here. Suicide, addiction, depression, cancer, heart disease are showing up everywhere. Changing the culture takes more than treating the symptoms.

So with much prayer and study, and with many surprises from God, Idlewild has begun the Children and Family Enrichment (CAFE) center at Idlewild.

The center is made up of our preschool which will reopen in 2018 using exciting new curriculum aimed at interrupting adverse experiences and teaching children self-regulation skills.

In April of this year, the CAFE will open at the Evergreen house with a Kemmons Wilson Family Center for Good Grief, offering free grief counseling for families and thereby directly addressing the adverse experiences caused by death and dying in a family system.

There will also be parenting programs that bring parents together to learn and grow. We believe “it takes a village,” and the Children and Family Enrichment parenting programs will bring parents together to rear healthy children as a team.

The hope is that we will avoid and interrupt adverse experiences for children, so that they may grow into healthy adults, so that our community might be healthier.

The newspaper in one hand and God’s word of hope in the other.

There is a tucked-away line in the Isaiah text that holds out God’s promise as we prayerfully move forward: *“You shall raise up the foundations of many generations.”*

Repairer of the breach.

Restorer of the streets.

Healer of the generations.

May it be so.

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