

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 “No More Bull”

Last weekend, when I was teaching clergy ethics and boundaries in Sacramento, our class had a discussion about how we identify ourselves as Christians. The majority of people in this class were United Church of Christ clergy, so I brought something up just for the fun of it. I said, “Do you all have folks in your denomination who introduce themselves as, ‘Hi, I’m Bill and I’m a seventh generation UCC member?’” Because that’s what folks in our denomination do. We’re pretty proud that we’re the first American-born Protestant denomination so we like to show off by tracing our roots back to the beginning. I’ve always had a tough time with this one. I know it’s good to be proud of your heritage and all, but what about us “first generation Disciples?” I didn’t inherit my faith ... I discovered the Disciples on my own! And that’s after I tried out a bunch of other denominations first! And this wasn’t an easy choice to make either. I came to faith apart from the church through a youth organization called Campus Life. I loved Jesus! But my youth director said I needed to find a church. My response was, “Do I *have* to? I mean, I love Jesus! But church and church people? They can be ... *troublesome*. I’m pretty sure Jesus and I can get along just fine on our own.” But my youth director wouldn’t let me get away with that, so I started my search for a church.

The first thing I learned is that there are a *lot* of ways to do church. Or at least to worship God! Or maybe I should say, there’s a lots of variety concerning *how* worship is done. In my experience, just about every church you attend will have singing, prayers, offerings, scripture readings, a time where the scriptures are interpreted and maybe some other rituals like reciting creeds or communion. The way it’s all packaged is where the differences comes in. After trying out several churches, I finally settled down with the Disciples, but *not* because I thought we had the best worship. I settled here because I didn’t have to check my brain at

the door and it seemed like the Disciples did a good job at *doing* the ministry of Jesus. Oh, and communion. I liked having communion every week too.

So when I hear scripture passages like the one Peggy just read from Isaiah, I feel ... challenged. I feel challenged because Isaiah lists some *aspects* of the ways we worship, and describes them as things that God hates and despises. Now when I say the “ways we worship” I mean the ways that God’s people in that time and place in history worshipped. We clearly do not practice animal sacrifice. Unless burgers and corned beef count, but that’s different. You know who likes this passage? Churches who don’t appreciate “high church” worship. If you don’t know what “high church worship” is, it’s worship that has a lot of “smells and bells” as one of my old seminary professors said. You know - incense, organ music, formal processions, robes, chanting, reciting from a common book of prayer, having formal blessings, confessional prayers ... things like that. Churches who don’t do these things *love* this passage because it supports their point of view that “high churches” are stuffy and that somehow God is displeased with what they perceive as unimaginative, repetitious, boring worship. “All this incense? These solemn assemblies?” God says it right here: “Take them away!”

You know who else likes this passage? Churches who don’t like “loosey goosey casual church worship.” I’m talking worship with 7-11 praise choruses (that’s a song that has the same seven words sung 11 times in a row), no formal worship structure, preachers who wear Hawaiian shirts and shoes with no socks, extemporaneous prayers heavily spiced with the word “just,” “Lord, we just wanna ... we’re just here today ... we just come to you.” Folks who don’t like this kind of worship say, “All these rambling self-centered prayers and meaningless worship? God says it right here, ‘Take them away!’”

Of course they'll *both* ignore that it also says that God isn't going to listen to our prayers anymore! Now it would be easy for me to stand up here and play "worship wars," but that won't help us face the real question that's on the table this morning, which is: "What *does* God think about the way we worship and how does it relate to the things that are most important to God?"

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian theologian, says there are two ways to worship God: One way is to do things *for* God that *God needs to have done*. Like run errands, carry messages, fight on God's side, do God's work, and so on. The other way is to do things for God that *you* need to do, like sing songs for God, create beautiful things for God, give things up for God, tell God what's on your mind and in your heart. In general rejoice in God and show that you love God. Not because God demands it, but because you genuinely want to demonstrate your love for God. Buechner goes on to say that whether your worship style is that of the Quakers, the Pontifical High Mass, the Family Service, or the Holy Rollers — unless there is an element of joy in the proceedings, the time would be better spent *doing* something useful. Which sounds like, "The time would be better spent sticking to the first way of worshipping God - doing things that God needs to have done."

Now I could be wrong about Frederick Buechner here, but I don't think he's saying that we should *choose* between these two ways of worshipping and just specialize in one or the other. But according to what I'm hearing from our passage from Isaiah is that God doesn't think we can specialize in good worship and ignore the call to do things that God needs to have done. Isaiah lists some of the things that God needs to have done: Bring about justice in the world, prevent the abuse of people, stand up for the vulnerable, and take sides with the forgotten. These are things that matter a great deal to God. These are things that God desperately wants to do. But God has no hands and feet in the world to do these things other than ours. That means God needs *us* to do these things.

It also appears pretty clear that God's objection to the way folks were worshipping had to do with how this worship was being offered. See, they had completely opted out of the "do things God needed to have done" option. There's nothing here to suggest that God was objecting because their worship *style* was sub-standard. People were just going through the motions of worship which made the worship an act of hypocrisy. In other words, they were talking the talk, but not walking the walk. That's why God said, "When you stretch out your hands in prayer, all I can see is the blood on your hands, so I turn away in disgust."

So, what I think we can say for sure, is that it doesn't matter how "perfect" our worship is or how perfectly we carry it out each week. It's a complete waste of time if we're not also doing what our prayers say we're going to do. Like, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?" We're not very good at that sometimes. So the question becomes, "What do you think God would be more impressed with: That we tune up the choir a little bit? Improve our singing? Dust off the banners more often? Or do you suppose God would be more pleased if we went to bat for people in our community and world who are mistreated? Maybe befriending some of the neglected youth in our community or providing safe space for folks who are still in shock over the fire or who are being pushed out of their homes. Maybe that would do more to make our worship a welcome gift to God.

There's still another question about the value of our worship that we haven't dealt with. What about the people who say, "Well, you know, we'd be better off just doing this Jesus work and not bothering with all this wordy - singy stuff." Are *they* right? Well if it were an either/or situation, then maybe they are. But what if it's a *both/and situation*? If we're doing our best to live out our faith in our relationships with the world around us, then I think it's important to gather together to praise God in song and prayer too!

Unless that worship is all just hot air.

In our text this morning, God says, “I don’t *need* your sacrifices; I don’t *need* your festivals; I don’t *need* your prayers.” Okay. But I don’t think we should interpret that to mean that God doesn’t *want* our prayers. See what I’m saying? Sure, the prayers may not be of any direct *benefit* to God, but God does love us and wants us to do what we need to do to become the whole people that we were created to be. I think it’s important to be engaged in worship because at some level it allows God to progressively transform us into what God needs us to be.

It’s like when a little kid makes something out of paper and glue and tape, brings it to you and says, “Here! This is for you!” The importance of that transaction is not that I can’t live another day without the gift. I don’t *need* it. But *that child* needed to make it for me and give it to me. For the child, it’s an act of love and generosity. And sharing that gift is part of how the child will learn to be a loving and generous person throughout her life. Shoot, there may be a day down the road when these kids’ ability to be loving and generous will inspire them to do something that the church may very genuinely need them to do.

So this strange and seemingly wasteful activity of giving up 70 minutes of our Sunday to spend in worship may not have an obvious or direct benefit to the world. But unless it’s a smokescreen to hide our corrupt lives like it was for the people in Isaiah’s time and place, then maybe our worship relates to our ability to become the agents of justice and mercy and love that God needs us to be. Just like the kid who offers the gift of a strange paper and tape object to an adult. It provides a path to the child’s ability to grow into a warm-hearted and generous adult. And if that’s the case, then I suggest that we stand up and do what we need to do with all the uninhibited love that we can muster!