

Matthew 25:31-46

Isaiah 58:1-14

October 23, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

The Stewardship of All of Life Worship & Works

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I held Clara Gray in my arms a few minutes ago, before I put the waters of baptism on her head, I said to her, “Clara Gray Casteen, for you Jesus came into the world; for you he died and conquered death; all this he did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it as yet. We love because God first loved us.” Clara Gray’s baptism today on her first birthday is a vivid example of the good news we heard last week from Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

The language and actions of the sacrament of baptism emphasize for us and remind us that our salvation comes from God alone, through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, our Savior. From the beginning God has provided for his children through the waters of creation, the waters of the flood, the waters of the Exodus, the water in the wilderness, the water of baptism in the Jordan River, and Jesus Christ, the Living Water.

The apostle Paul wrote these words to the church at Rome, about our new life in Christ: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3-4) Once again this week we hear, “Walk this way!” In the prayer of thanksgiving over the baptismal waters this morning, I prayed that the “water may be a spring gushing up to eternal life” and that God would “pour out your Holy Spirit upon Clara Gray, that as she grows in her faith, she may have wisdom to discern her gifts, strength to obey your will, and joy in answering your call.”

At the end of last week’s sermon, we were reminded that we are “saved to service.” Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” In today’s Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah tells what kind of good works God has created us to do and expects us to do.

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Our worship of God, then, is the most important good work we can do as people who have been saved and redeemed by God’s amazing grace through Jesus Christ.

A lot of work goes into planning and leading the weekly worship service here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Typically, I try to plan my preaching a couple of months ahead of time. That way, Karla, Vera, and I can work together to coordinate the hymns, anthems, and responses with the scripture readings, sermon message, and theme of the worship service. At the beginning of each week, usually on Monday or Tuesday, I begin working on the rest of the service — the Opening Sentences, the prayers and responses. In addition, there are the rituals and customs of worship that we observe and practice in this church, especially on special worship occasions such as Easter, Christmas, weddings, funerals, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Yes, a lot of work goes into planning and leading the weekly worship service here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Did you know that you also have work to do in our weekly worship service? The sermon texts are listed in the weekly bulletins and the monthly newsletters, so you can read God's Word, pray about it, and prepare to hear the Word. Also, all of the prayers, responses, hymns, and affirmations of faith are called the "liturgy," which literally means "the work of the people." In other words, the weekly worship is not a show by Phil, Karla, Vera, and the choir for your entertainment. Instead, our weekly worship service is the work of ***all of God's people*** to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Have you ever wondered where the Opening Sentences come from? Sometimes I write them. Sometimes they are taken from the psalms. Many times I use online worship planning resources such as re:Worship, Ministry Matters, and Lectionary Liturgies. I usually consider many possible Opening Sentences, since, along with the choral call to worship, they set the tone and theme for our corporate worship. When I use an online worship planning resource, I usually search for liturgy based on the sermon text for that Sunday. For instance, I would type in Isaiah 58:1-14 . . .

As I was working on this sermon, I came across the following idea in a commentary on Isaiah's message to God's people. It said, "How would your congregation respond to this call to worship? 'We hope you are not planning to go through the motions in worship, singing the songs but never engaging your hearts, hearing the Scripture but not listening for God, or giving an offering but not giving yourselves, because if so, you are not doing God any favors. You do not get points for attendance. If you really worship God today, then you will share with the poor, listen to the lonely, and stop avoiding those in need.'"¹

How do you think Isaiah's congregation responded to his call to worship? Or, to be more exact, Isaiah's critique of their worship? Or, to be even ***more*** exact, God's critique of their worship? After all, they were observing all of the regulations, doing everything right, and practicing all of the rituals in their worship. They went to the temple to seek God. They listened to God's Word. They prayed to God and delighted in God's presence. They fasted. They humbled themselves. They bowed their heads. They lay down in sackcloth and ashes. They did a lot of work when they worshiped God. But they must have been scratching their heads when they asked, "Why do we

fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” You know what they say — be careful what you ask for, you just might get it. Through his prophet, God answered his people’s questions: “Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked hand. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” (Is. 58:4)

God’s blunt answer about Israel’s worship is in line with the prophetic tradition about what makes for true worship.

Jeremiah stood in the gates of the Temple and preached the word from God, “Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place.” (Jeremiah 7:3-7)

Amos brought the Word of God to bear on the economic and social situations of God’s people, when he relayed God’s message, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)

With God’s message against corrupt religious and political officials and God’s concern with ethical issues, Micah let God’s people know in no uncertain terms what God expected of them in their worship and their everyday living: “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6-8)

There is a consistent theme running from the prophets through Jesus’ ministry, reflected in the life of the early church, and passed on to us as we gather here on Sunday morning: Worship & Works. The “Directory for Worship” of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has an entire section devoted to “Worship and the Ministry of the Church in the World.” “The church participates in God’s mission to the world through its ministry and worship. Worship presents the reality of the divine rule which God has promised in Jesus Christ as the final renewal of creation. The worshipping community in its integrity before the Word and its unity in prayer and Sacraments is a sign of the presence of the reign of God. The church in its ministry bears witness to God’s reign through the proclamation of the gospel, through works of compassion and reconciliation, and through the stewardship of creation and of life. . . God calls the church in worship to join the mission of Jesus Christ in service to the world. As it participates in

that mission the church is called to worship God in Jesus Christ, who reigns over the world.”²

Our Stewardship theme for the past two years has been “Worship. Grow. Go.” This theme reflects what the session identified as the most important areas of our life together as the Wallace Presbyterian Church. We begin with worship. We aim to grow in our faith. But if we leave it there, we are like the people whom the Lord chastised through Isaiah, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day.” Our worship of God includes and is completed when we “Go” in Jesus’ name. The Lord is very specific — “share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, cover the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and the prisoner.”

The stewardship of **all** of life includes our worship and our works. When there is a disconnect between our worship rituals, no matter how carefully planned and executed, and our acts of compassion, our worship will become hollow and self-serving. In the next couple of weeks, you will receive a narrative budget and a Mission and Ministry Catalog from the session. Both of these translate the dollars and cents of our annual budget into the acts of compassion — our works — that we hope include and complete our worship of God.

God’s word to his people through his prophet Isaiah is particularly harsh, but also a good warning and reminder to us who also come to worship God with all of our rituals and ways of doing things in the sanctuary. As one writer has described the worship of God in the Temple, “The temple in Jerusalem was standing room only. No one missed a service. They sang psalms — old ones, new ones, all kinds of psalms. They said prayers and gave offerings. What they did not do was let worship trouble their consciences. If they kept their distance from God, then they could also keep their distance from God’s children. They did not want to make connections between their worship and their neighbors.”³

People of God, there **is** a direct connection between our worship and our neighbors. When we gathered at the baptismal font this morning, we remembered that we are washed clean by God, saved by God’s grace, claimed by Jesus Christ, and commissioned to service in his name.

Isaiah talks about the particular religious act of fasting. I’ll end with a writing by William Arthur Ward called “Fasting and Feasting.” As I read it, think about how our worship of God can and must connect with our neighbors, near and far.

*Fast from judging others; feast on the Christ dwelling in them.
Fast from emphasis on differences; feast on the unity of all life.
Fast from apparent darkness; feast on the reality of light.
Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.
Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.*

Fast from anger; feast on patience.
Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.
Fast from worry; feast on trust.
Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.
Fast from negatives; feast on affirmatives.
Fast from unrelenting pressures; feast on unceasing prayer.
Fast from hostility; feast on nonviolence.
Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.
Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.
Fast from personal anxiety; feast on eternal Truth.
Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.
Fast from facts that depress; feast on truths that uplift.
Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.
Fast from suspicion; feast on truth.
Fast from thoughts that weaken; feast on promises that inspire.
Fast from shadows of sorrow; feast on the sunlight of serenity.
Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.
Fast from problems that overwhelm; feast on prayer that undergirds.
Gentle God, gift us with your presence, so we can be a gift to others
in carrying out your work. Amen.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, help us follow the path that Jesus walked — to learn what needs to be done; to serve others; to connect with our church and our community; to care for those who suffer; to know ourselves; to share our gifts; to love one another; to seek and embrace peace. Amen.

NOTES

¹Brett Younger, “Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany, Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12),” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1, Advent Through Transfiguration* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 319 [David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.).

²*Book of Order 2015-2017 The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II, Chapter VII: Worship and the Ministry of the Church in the World, W-7.1001, Worship and Ministry, W-7.1002, Worship and Mission* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2015), p. 145.

³Brett Younger, p. 317.