

***“Whatever is honorable...”***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 29, 2017

Texts: Isaiah 58:13-14

*“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”* These words probably sound pretty familiar and they should. They come from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi and I often use them as the core of a benediction prayer at the end of our worship services. I started using this as a benediction a little over a year ago, and folks really like it, with good reason.

Paul offered these words to the church in Philippi in the final paragraphs of a letter he wrote to them. He wrote the letter to address a conflict which had arisen in the church and, as he is bringing the letter to a conclusion, he is reminding them once again how a Christian – one who follows Christ – is to live life each day. Notice that he is urging them to “think about these things.” He is not just telling them to do it. He is telling them to think about it, to make the effort to understand just what being a Christian involves, as they move forward into life each day. That’s why I think it is such a wonderful prayer to use for closing our

worship for surely we need to do the same thing that Paul is urging those long ago Christians to do.

So, as I sat down in December to think about what might provide a foundation for a sermon series leading into Lent, this text from Philippians popped into my head. Of course, I thought! Only I can't use the same text to preach on week after week. But, we could explore these key phrases through the lens of other scripture texts and thus a sermon series was born! Since there are six key phrases but only five Sundays I opted to begin with "whatever is honorable" because I didn't want to risk us going down the rabbit-hole of debating truth. But whatever is honorable ... that's worth a second look. And, after doing some research, I realized that Isaiah provides the perfect framework for that conversation.

"Honorable" is not a word you hear that often in daily life, unless you're a courtroom attorney. Then every workday in court begins with the words, "the Honorable Judge So-and-so presiding." For the rest of us, it's a word we're aware of and sort of know what it means, but we just don't think about it because we don't use it in our everyday conversations that much. That being said, I'm wondering what you think it means. [*Pause for responses.*] Or perhaps another way to consider its meaning is to consider who you would name if I asked you whom you know

personally that you consider an honorable person. [*Pause for responses.*]

I think I would have to name my dad, the most ethical, upright person I have ever known. He would not so much as park where he shouldn't even for a minute so my mom could jump out of the car to drop something in the mailbox or dash into the grocery store. "That sign doesn't say 'no parking unless you're Ruth Shilling and you'll just be a minute,'" He would say. "It says NO PARKING!" That was my dad in a nutshell. When he ran his own furniture refinishing business and his elderly assistant Gus started having health problems, he paid Gus for sick days even though money was tight. Why? Because it was the right thing to do. That's what it means to be honorable, I think. Doing the right thing just because it's the right thing. Maybe it's not the thing that will make you rich or powerful or popular, but it's still the right thing to do, and that's all that matters.

Isaiah would agree, I think, with that assessment of "honorable." These two verses we read from Isaiah 58 are part of a larger text which articulates what God thinks is the right thing to do. As a prophet, Isaiah knows that his responsibility to the people is to do precisely that – remind the people what God wants for them and expects from them. In this 58<sup>th</sup> chapter Isaiah is telling the people that they can believe they are as pious and observant of religious rules as its possible to be but if they do not

honor God's priorities when it comes to people, their worship, their sacrifices mean nothing. "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers," Isaiah says. "Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high." Wow. That's harsh. And it's also very clear. Isaiah is telling the people that their fasting on the Sabbath, their observances of the Sabbath, mean nothing if they mistreat their workers, if they quarrel and fight. And even more than that, Isaiah says God will NOT hear their prayers if their own selfish interests close their hearts to God's commands for justice.

Then, just in case they still aren't clear on what Isaiah is talking about, he gives them specific examples of what God demands in the next few verses. "Is this not 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 Isaiah doesn't stop there describing what God sees as acceptable sacrifice and fast: "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?" No doubt there at all what God expects: Care for those who are hungry and homeless, naked and afraid, with nowhere else to turn. No qualifiers. No escape clauses. No saying I'm happy to help people I think deserve it but I won't help people who I am afraid might hurt me.

Nope, no such limits set by God, Isaiah says emphatically. Those are strictly human limits and it is such limits that end up limiting our connection to God. If we are not doing what God wants us to do, if we are not being upright and ethical and honorable in our treatment of the other – whoever the other is – than we are driving ourselves away from God and driving ourselves toward our own destruction. On this Isaiah is very clear and very, very emphatic. God won't even hear our prayers if we substitute our own limited human judgement for God's.

To emphasize just how complete this separation from God can become, Isaiah ends this text by talking about the Sabbath itself. What does it mean to honor the Sabbath, is the question Isaiah is answering. Now let's remember, this is one of the Ten Commandments – the fifth one to be exact. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. So what does Isaiah say about this? “If you refrain from trampling on the Sabbath ... if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable ... if you honor it by not going your own way and serving your own interests ... then you shall delight in the Lord.” You can't just do what you think is right the rest of the time, follow a few rules about the Sabbath and think that passes muster with God, Isaiah says. You can't be self-centered and selfish for six days a week and then try to behave a little better on the Sabbath and think you're fooling God, Isaiah says. It's not possible because all those

selfish interests come right with you into the Sabbath. They are sitting beside you while you offer sacrifice and pray. They are clogging up your hearing so that the word of God doesn't penetrate all the way through to your soul. They are keeping you from seeing what God needs you to see and to act upon – that all people are beloved of God. That all people deserve compassion and justice, mercy and kindness. Don't think you can fool God into believing you are a pious, righteous person if the rest of your life proves you are not. No one can fool God. Those who try only fool themselves.

But, what happens if we do as God asks? What happens if we take the time to delight in God's Sabbath, if we pause long enough to realize that people are hurting and need help? What happens if we stop fighting with each other and start focusing on God's priorities? Well, Isaiah is equally emphatic about that. God "will make you ride upon the heights of the earth." Wow, now there's an image. Ride upon the heights of the earth! You will be soaring, Isaiah says! You will see all there is to see and you will be part of God's eternal plan for the universe. Then, Isaiah says something else about what God will do that's curious. God "will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob." God will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob. Jacob who wrestled with God all night. Jacob who experienced God face to face and lived. Jacob who cheated his brother out of his birthright only to find

forgiveness from his brother and from God at the end of his life. Being fed by God with the heritage of Jacob means nothing less than receiving the nurturing sustenance necessary for life itself as something you receive from God's own hand. God feeds you with hope and promise, with justice and mercy, with kindness and compassion when you embody the delight in God that is the only sacrifice, the only worship acceptable to God. And that is only possible when the hungry are fed, the homeless are housed, the naked are clothed, and the refugees are welcomed without reservation and fear. It's only possible when fighting and bickering stop and energies are put into what matters – delight in God expressed through love shown to all God's people.

Whatever is honorable? Isaiah is clear about what that means. Delighting in God – in God's love and vision and hope and possibility – so much that caring for the other, whoever the other is and whatever they need, is the only option you can see. Being honorable is the opposite of being fearful and anxious, the opposite of being selfish and self-aggrandizing, the opposite of being over confident and under appreciative of the gifts others bring to the table. Being honorable is both task and goal. It is not automatic nor is it easy to master. It requires taking yourself out of the center of things in order to make room for God and God's expectations of all those who claim to follow God. Words and pious devotion are not enough, Isaiah says, to be truly honorable.

That comes only when God's will comes before your own. And the pursuit of that possibility, dear friends, is the work of a lifetime and the reason the church exists. What is God's will for us and for our world? How do we stand a chance of figuring that out and making it real? How do we go from who we are to who we would love to be – honorable and delightful to God? Well, there are no easy answers or magic formulas, that's for sure. There's only persistence, hard work and the sure and certain knowledge that God walks with us every step of the way, Jesus shows us that way and the Holy Spirit provides what we need to move forward. Such is our faith. Such is our life together in the church. May it be so, always. Never was it needed more. Amen.