

**Exploring Progressive Christianity 4**  
**Isaiah 58:9b-14 and Micah 6:6-8**  
**August 11, 2024**  
**Rev. Kelley Becker**

As you know, our Worship and Wonder children's worship program became Worship Camp for the summer. Rather than telling a Bible story and asking children to respond to it creatively each week, Worship Camp was designed to teach children about all the parts of corporate worship and why we do each part. I wrote the curriculum, but I am under no grand illusion that a month from now the children will remember why we do a call to worship or invocation each week or even what they are. And, if I am honest, I am totally okay with that. I don't even care if y'all know what those things are or why we do them. Knowing those things will not change your life or mine.

Worshipping together is one way we live out our faith, but it is not the only way, nor is it the most important way. Corporate worship is important because it is something we do together. When we worship, we come together to celebrate what Love has done and is doing in our lives and in the world. This gift of community we experience each week hopefully inspires us to create community and share love when we leave worship. If it doesn't, then we've wasted our time. Worship is nothing if it doesn't cause us to act and if it doesn't impact how we treat each other and our neighbors. What does the Lord require of us? Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison, Dean of Phillips Theological Seminary answers that question with her interpretation of Micah 6:8. What does the Lord require of us? To "make justice happen, now. Love passionately as God loves, now. Be God's image in the world, now." In other words, we show the world what we believe about the Holy and each other by how we act outside of worship.

This week's Progressive Christianity Core Value says the same thing.

"[We] know that the way we behave towards one another and Earth is the fullest expression of what we believe, therefore we vow to walk as Jesus might have walked in this world with radical compassion, inclusion, and bravery to confront and positively change the injustices we experience as well as those we see others experiencing."

It sounds simple enough really. We act based on what we believe all the time. I eat more than one donut whenever I am presented with them because I believe they are delicious. I walk sweet Porter every day because I believe it is good for both of us. So it makes sense that what we believe about God and other human beings would also be reflected in how we act. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. Christians talk This is not a new phenomenon.

"I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land... I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels...I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with

the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, womenwhippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. . . . The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.”<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Frederick Douglass, from David Blight's book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. Douglass began his life enslaved, and while enslaved he taught hundreds of other people who were enslaved to read and write. Later he became a leader in the abolitionist movement, and at one point, he was a preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. He eventually left the church because he found that the oppressive spirit of the white churches existed there as well.

Christianity had a problem then and it has a problem now. The problem, in my former boss' words, is people. He used to say, “Church would be great if it weren't for the people.” He usually said this after Board meetings. But I think what he was getting at is that people are much better at talking about faith than they are living out their faith. It is easier to quote scripture and extend our “thoughts and prayers” to the ones suffering than it is to live out what the scripture says or actually do something ourselves to bring about what we are thinking and praying about.

But these “people problems” started long before Christianity. Our Jewish ancestors struggled too. This is Isaiah 58: 9b-14.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup> 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.  
<sup>11</sup> The Lord will guide you continually

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<sup>1</sup> Blight, David, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Macmillan Higher Education, 2016).

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.  
<sup>12</sup>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.

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the Sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests or pursuing your own affairs;  
<sup>14</sup>then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Can you see a little of our world today and our lives in this ancient text? The post-exilic community addressed here knew something about life's messiness. They had lost people they loved. They had wondered what the future would be like. So much had been taken from them. As they sought to rebuild their community, they were reminded of what it would take to move from wrecked to repaired. Amid our own mess, this text serves as a welcome reminder of what can be and what it will take for us to get there.

We, like the ancient Israelites, have a choice. We can accept that the world and our lives will always be exactly as they are now, or we can act as "repairers of the breach." In his book *Forward Together: A Moral Message for the Nation*, Disciples of Christ minister and activist Rev. Dr. William Barber II wrote. "I am aware there are many different names and beliefs about the nature of the faith we each hold. But I know that if we take risks of faith, if we reach across old man-made breaches in our human family, steady in our march toward justice, we may be called repairers of the breach."<sup>2</sup>

We can do this by investing in each other and by believing that what is good for the collective is ultimately good for us as individuals. We can do this by divesting from practices and beliefs that prioritize the individual's healing and hope over and against the marginalized and that includes the messaging of the church. Personal salvation is not what Christianity is about. Jesus' message, Jesus' fight was for collective

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<sup>2</sup> Barber, William J., *Forward Together: A Moral Message for the Nation*, (Chalice Press: St. Louis, 2014), 6.

salvation, and not salvation from an angry God, but salvation from the man-made oppression and vulnerabilities of this world.

In chapter 58 of Isaiah, God addresses two specific acts of worship - the practices of fasting and the Sabbath. The text tells us that both were being used, not in actual service to good in the world, but for individual gain and the interests of the powerful. In verse 3, the prophet writes, "You serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers." A commentator I read this week responded to this writing, "In this post-exile era, how tempting it must be for those with power to turn to the kind of violence and exploitation their own community was just experiencing at the hands of others. The community has suffered so much, the generational trauma would inevitably shape the lives of the individuals who grew up in its aftermath. When one comes from such legacies of pain, it can be so difficult to trust in the practices of community and love."<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to trust in the practices of community and love when we are sitting here, together in the sanctuary. It is easy to say on Sunday mornings that this week we will do better, but when we leave here, our trust is shaken. We go home and see the bills that need to be paid, we get the Sunday Scaries about work tomorrow, we watch the news and hear politicians saying horrible things and we see images of people suffering all over the world. We read about artifacts sold from the Price Tower and local leaders gearing up to fight about the Pride celebration again, and then trusting in community and love seems not just impossible, but foolish. So we put our trust in oppressive power structures and we build walls of protection around ourselves. We tell ourselves that the words we sang and the prayers we prayed on Sunday don't have anything to do with real life.

But when spiritual practices and/or our collective gatherings of worship are disconnected from how we live our lives, how we treat our neighbors, and what kind of world we are committed to working towards, all we are left with is a bunch of empty rituals and pomp and circumstance. Theologian Walter Brueggeman calls this the "hypocritical gap between the actual conduct of the community and the intention of the community expressed in worship." How we act outside of this space tells our neighbors and the world what we believe.

So far this morning we have sung the words, "What does the Lord require of you...to seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God." We've burned candles, symbolizing our belief that the Holy lives in us and among us. We've prayed for God's kin-dom to come and we've claimed that we've forgiven our debtors. We've sung the words, "Til age and race and gender no longer separate, Til pulpit press and politics are free of greed and hate, God has work for us to do." And in a few minutes we will gather at the communion table and proclaim it a place where

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<sup>3</sup> [https://enfleshed.com/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce\\_uploads/2021/03/Aug25-nm85zc.pdf](https://enfleshed.com/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2021/03/Aug25-nm85zc.pdf), accessed 8/8/24.

everyone who loves and seeks to be loved is welcome. Some of us will meet God there, we will all meet each other and hopefully the best versions of ourselves there.

All of this must impact how we live when we leave this place. If it doesn't, we've wasted our time. If it doesn't, we are no different than a country club. If it doesn't, everything we have taught our children this summer in Worship Camp is a lie. I don't believe it is. I believe we are a community that desperately hopes and tries to be repairers of the breach. The breaches of racism and misogyny and xenophobia and gossip and grudges and homophobia and transphobia and wealth disparity and exclusion. I have watched as you have served lunches, filled the food pantry, comforted each other, and volunteered in the community. I have listened to you talk about how your hearts break for our neighbors and I have heard you brainstorm solutions and talk about hope. There is so much more to do. We have to keep showing up and we have to keep proving we are who we say we are. We gather here each week to be reminded of who we are. And we serve to show our neighbors who they are...beloved, important, worthy, and enough. Being here together matters. We are better together. Always. Amen.