

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

20th Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Isaiah 1:17-20

Title: “Outside My Own Little World: What if there’s a greater purpose?”

Years ago I took a Dale Carnegie course and one of the first lessons of the class had to do with the one thing every human being likes the sound of more than anything else. Any ideas what that might be? More than anything else we like the sound of our own names, so they emphasize over and over again how important it is to use people’s names when building relationships because it is the most pleasing sound to any person.

I have to admit I was skeptical when I first heard this, but then I started paying attention to how I felt when someone used my name in conversation and I came to realize that Carnegie was right. It does make a difference when someone uses my name. I may want to argue that it doesn’t matter, that I don’t need someone to speak my name in order to be in a good relationship with someone but I’ve found it does matter. Even if you have to cheat and look at my nametag, it matters because I do, in fact, like the sound of my name.

One of the lessons I learned from that lesson is that we can be very self-focused creatures, we human beings. Focused on our own comforts, our own needs and wants. It’s not that this is a negative thing. Sometimes we must think of our own needs because if we don’t take care of ourselves how can we be of any use to anyone else? Jesus did proclaim that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, right, which means we need to tend to our own interests, too, if we are to love our neighbor. It’s just that our world can get quite small when all we focus on is our own interests, and in doing so we may find ourselves asking questions like “Who am I?” “What if there is a greater purpose?” “Where can I find fulfillment for my life when I feel unsettled and unsatisfied?” “Is there something more for me to do on this earth?”

The people of Israel and Judah found themselves dealing with the same human condition, and the prophets of God were there to remind them of their greater purpose. Now the prophets were not always loved. Prophets tell truths that people do not want to hear. They challenge power by telling the truth of what they see and the powerful do not take kindly to such things.

So Isaiah, the prophet, has some things to say on God’s behalf to the people of Judah. His book begins with a vision, a vision that starts right out of the gate with unpleasing words:

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,

but they have rebelled against me.
³The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.

Did you hear that? We hear God telling the people that even oxen and donkeys know their masters but the people are dumber than animals because they don't know to whom they belong. They don't get their master at all.

And yet, they worship God with gusto. They burn incense as a symbol of the Spirit of God in their presence. They observe religious festivals and honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. They stretch out their hands in prayer. They even bring an offering every week as they make their sacrifices as a gift to God. All the rituals of honoring God are there, and from the outside looking in, it appears as if the people are very religious indeed. Their actions inside the sanctuary reflect people who are deeply devoted to God.

But God is not flattered or pleased by the religiosity. God, in fact, has harsh words for the worshippers saying,

“I cannot endure...my soul hates...they have become a burden to me...I am weary of bearing them...I will hide my eyes from you...I will not listen.”

God who gave Moses the commandment to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy does not appreciate the kind of worship Israel and Judah are practicing. They might have the best Bible studies in the land, the most prayer groups, the greatest hymn singing, the most elaborate Christmas Eve services, but the Word of the Lord is that God finds it all an abomination.

I remember hearing Garrison Keillor, the humorist story teller, say that of all things he could be in life, a prophet is not a position he would like to hold. Because prophets are too often beaten and killed.

When Jesus was nearing crucifixion, he paused and offered a lament over Jerusalem:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37)

Prophets are not well regarded because they speak truth to power and power doesn't always appreciate the challenge. The question in this situation: why is God so upset with people who are doing what God has commanded? What is it that has God in a tither about praying, sacrificing, worshipping people?

God articulates an answer in the final few verses:

I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

God is not pleased with religious rituals that are not lived out beyond the sanctuary. The indictment is issued to those who are diligent in prayer and religious practice but who walk outside after service is over and ignore those who are oppressed or vulnerable or alone. It's as if the people of Israel and Judah are in their own little world when they worship and choose not to notice—or worse—are complicit in all the injustices and forms of oppression of vulnerable people outside their own little world.

God's words in Isaiah remind me of an old parable I read 30 years ago, a parable I've never forgotten. It's a parable having to do with a lifesaving station. Maybe you've heard it before:

On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as sort of a club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decorations, and there was a miniature lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired

crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities, since they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

This parable speaks to the lifecycle of the church. And it's a challenge to all of us to be mindful of God's call and claim on our lives: there is a greater purpose for our lives as Christians and our shared life in the church than simply coming together for our solemn assemblies. The greater purpose is to live out our baptism when we leave, to care for the orphan and the widow, those who are vulnerable and in need.

In the spiritual gifts class those who are in the class read a quote in the chapter on dreams that is rather startling. It's from a Pastor Wayne Cordeiro of New Hope Christian Fellowship in Hawaii:

“If God's whole purpose in saving you was to have you baptized and get you into heaven, He would have had you shot as you left your baptism! The fact that He left you here means He has plans for you—there is something He wants you to accomplish.” (p. 81, *Serving from the Heart*).

What is the greater purpose to which God might be calling you? Is there someone who is homebound you've been thinking about and maybe asking why doesn't someone go visit them? Then go yourself. Is there someone who has lost a spouse or significant other and you know there is a need? Then go and do what you can to offer your care. Is there a cause that weighs heavy on your heart? Maybe you have a heart for kids who are challenged in some way and they need caring people to tutor them. What is stopping you from finding a way to contribute for their welfare?

Even children can seek justice for others when it might not benefit you. Maybe you are invited to sit with friends at lunch but someone else is told to go away. You can go and sit with

the one who is told they're not welcome. Or you can make sure that everyone gets a turn before others get a second turn.

Or maybe, children, you can make friends with the kid who is always chosen last for games or the person everyone laughs at or who are slow students in school. Those are the people who are oppressed by other people and you can make a difference in their lives.

There is a greater purpose for our lives beyond building up our own little world. It's not that prayer and worship and offering isn't important to God. That's not the point of Isaiah's vision. It's just that prayer and worship and offering has a greater purpose than simply taking care of our own needs. The need for us to worship God who created us is also part of the biblical story because it reminds us that we are God's children and provides the opportunity to deepen our relationship with God. It's just that worship doesn't end here. It continues on the sidewalks of our lives, in the streets, in our homes and school and places of work. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once said that "the world is my parish", not just my church, but the world. Not just my own little world but the world.