

“Giving Meaningfully to Reform Our Hearts”

Isaiah 1:10-18

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Seattle First Baptist Church

Today is Pledge Sunday, an important day in the life of our congregation, when we consider the importance of giving, financially and otherwise, to the mission of this church. And today is also Reformation Sunday, an important day for Protestants of all flavors, as we remember the theological reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century who sought a way to be church that differed from the dominant European Catholic church.

However, both of these observances are complex—more complex than we often admit.

Take Pledge Sunday, for example. On a practical note, church staff need to know what people are planning to give so that we can formulate our church budget for the next year—impacting everything from how we pay our light bills to how we pay staff to the amount we have in our Benevolence fund to help our neighbors. And on a more theological note, Pledge Sunday is an excellent opportunity for considering the spiritual and emotional impact of giving.

Practically, giving is complicated—there are so many considerations to make: how much time, energy or finances can I afford? How do I convey the value I place in my church through my gifts? What is going on in my life that might need more time, energy or finances right now, such that my gift to my church will be less? How do I make sure I am giving in such a way that I make the most impact and match my values well?

We also must acknowledge that Pledge Sunday can also be challenging, as some people feel they are being shamed into giving money to an institution that increasingly doesn't have a lot of bearing on their lives. And, regrettably, even progressive churches can fall into the trap of promising prosperity of one kind or another to those who give generously of their resources. And then there's Reformation Sunday. On one hand, as a Protestant and as a Baptist, I am grateful for the Reformers—not only Martin Luther, but Menno Simons and Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, among others—who pushed back against the Catholic church's hypocrisy of selling pardons for sin, and sought a different way of being church that eliminated the need for an intercessor between humans and God.

But also, we have to acknowledge the virulent antisemitism of some of the Reformers, particularly of Martin Luther, who contributed greatly to anti-Jewish theology and sentiment among European churchgoers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The legacy of Luther's dangerous and violent antisemitic theology still lingers in Christianity today, and must, along with racism and white supremacy, be carefully and intentionally rooted out.

Some of this theology reared its head for me this week, as I prepared this sermon and researched our scripture for today.

When reading Isaiah 1:10-18 at face value, it seems like the prophet is advocating for the elimination of sacrifices. Christians throughout history read passages like these, from the Hebrew Bible, and jumped to extreme conclusions that placed Christianity over and against Judaism. Sometimes they thought, “Ok--sacrifices are bad and change of heart is good. The way of being

religious in the Old Testament is bad and the way of being religious in the New Testament is good. God of the ‘Old Testament’ is angry and vengeful and God of the New Testament is good.” Notice that I use “air quotes” when talking about “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” because even those names are part of thinking that is “supersessionist” -- meaning regarding Christianity as better than Judaism. And because today we know better than to make remarks like this or give into this simplistic, reductive and harmful thinking, I wondered what was really going on behind the prophet’s words.

Robert Alter, famed Hebrew Bible scholar and commentator, wrote about this passage, “this is not a pitch for the abolition of sacrifice but rather an argument against a mechanistic notion of sacrifice, against the idea that sacrifice can put man in good standing with God regardless of human behavior. The point becomes entirely clear at the end of verse 15, when the prophet says that it is hands stained with blood stretched out in prayer that are utterly abhorrent to God. (Thus, the grain offering is “false” or “futile”) because it is brought by people who have oppressed the poor and failed to defend widows and orphans.”<sup>1</sup>

The prophet is not rejecting worship that includes sacrifices and offerings. He is rejecting the hypocrisy of people who make sacrifices and offerings, who engage in worship and prayer, who parade as pious, and still all the while are oppressing others and profiting from others’ exploitation. And that is something that I think every religious community can relate to, across time and place and tradition, —when piety is placed on a pedestal, but the behaviors do not match up to the values that a person or a community proclaims.

And here is where I find resonance with this text and Pledge Sunday and Reformation Sunday--- in all their complexities: Isaiah is calling for the values of the community to match with their worship practices. What is “detestable” to God is the lack of care for orphans and widows, and exploitation of the oppressed. The call from the prophet to “do good” and “seek justice” are absolutely important values for our Pledge Sunday—and for any day!

And in a way, in this passage, Isaiah is calling for the worshippers to reform their hearts—for them to match their practices with their values so that the whole community can benefit—not just some profiting from others’ misfortune, but the community taking care of each other, particularly those who have been pushed to live on the margins by the powers and principalities that dominate this world.

In a commentary on this passage, biblical scholar James Limburg says: “The typical image for “justice” in our world is the blindfolded lady holding scales: everything is fair, even, balanced. But for the Hebrew prophets, the images are different. They are first of all dynamic: Amos pictures justice as a surging, roaring, rolling, cleansing, river! “Let justice roll down like waters...” (Amos 5:21-24). Micah called for his people to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8). Isaiah points out that doing justice is a grateful response of a people for whom God has already done much...Finally, Isaiah calls his hearers to be advocates for the powerless, taking up the cause of the powerless, which means the widow (who has no husband), the orphan (who has no parents) and the poor (who have no money; Isaiah 1:16-17).

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<sup>1</sup> p. 623 in Prophets

This would include re-forming our laws which discriminate against the powerless (Isaiah 10:1-4) and being pro-active in programs designed to help the helpless, the hapless, the homeless and the hopeless.”<sup>2</sup> This is a worthy topic for Pledge Sunday, indeed.

During Bible Study on Thursday, Cherry pointed out that the Inclusive Bible shares verse 16 of our scripture passage in this way: God says, “get your injustice out of my sight.” Wow. That is quite strong language. But that is part of the complexity of this passage—God again and again, through prophets and visions and words and natural events, tells the people—tells *us*—to pay attention to what it means to live well, doing justice and loving mercy and walking humbly—but again and again we fall short. We retreat into apathy when life gets overwhelming, we make excuses for our behaviors that hurt ourselves and others, we worship with blood on our hands as we profit from the exploitation of others living close to the margins. And to this, God says “go away with your hypocrisy, I don’t want to see your injustice, I don’t care how much you worship—but instead, keep learning how to do justice. Keep learning how to serve each other. Keep learning how to advocate for those whose lives have been shaped by oppressive forces that keep you on top.”

To end our Thursday Bible Study, I invited participants to consider “giving meaningfully.” This is a phrase that was introduced to me by Susan Blythe-Goodman and David Delgado a few years ago, and that I have held on to since. I think about meaningful giving as a personal choice, done apart from social pressure or expectation, and pursued thoughtfully and intentionally. Meaningful giving may be different for each person, but a common thread is that giving takes on meaning when it is aligned with your values.

When discussing giving to the church, one Bible Study attendee said giving to the church was like taking care of a home, which is appropriate for this congregation because we like to say ‘welcome home’ so much! But in taking care of a home, you need to pay the bills—keep the lights on, make sure the plumbing is working, provide space for hospitality. And you need to take care of the upkeep proactively as well—provide for the future, so that when challenges arise, you won’t be overwhelmed. Another person pointed out that our church building is a huge part of our ministry—we have over 67 groups meeting using the building regularly throughout the year—from AA and NA meetings to choirs and other musical groups to the Red Cross blood drives to LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups and more. So, keeping the lights on and making sure the plumbing works is providing for the ministry of space and hospitality to these groups in our community!

Others commented that everyone has something to give to our church—and we limit ourselves when we think just about money! Several attendees shared moving stories about when they witnessed someone (who seemed to have very little in the way of material possessions) give generously. Giving meaningfully takes many forms: people give their time volunteering, give their energy in helping organize programs or events or serve coffee at coffee hour, give their creativity as they plan and lead small groups, and they give of themselves as they participate in the life of our community. In fact, each of you, being present here, gives all of us the opportunity

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-3/commentary-on-isaiah-110-18>

to get to know you, to get to witness the beauty and goodness that is YOU, and get to live life alongside you.

When done with intentionality and awareness of what cause you are contributing to and why, giving can be done joyfully -- not out of obligation or because it looks good, but because you are grateful for the opportunity to participate by giving to a community you care about.

Dear church, I am not a fan of saying “the Bible is clear” about pretty much anything. But this is one of those places that put this to the test. As people who are seeking to follow the Way of Jesus, which was shaped by his Jewish prophetic tradition that we read from today, we are hearing this message loud and clear:

“learn to do good;  
seek justice;  
rescue the oppressed;  
defend the orphan;  
plead for the widow.”

And in all of the ways that we give, and in all that it takes to re-form our hearts so that our lives are centered on following this Way of Life, Love and Liberation—let us continue to seek the voice of the Holy, the heart of the Holy, and Sacred Love that binds us as a community that cares for one another.

May it ever be so. Amen.