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Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

FAST LIVING

I am a morning person. I generally get up before the break of dawn. As soon as I emerge from the bedroom, our dog, Sophie, quickly arises to greet me. At that point, she has one thing on her mind – breakfast. Now that I mention the word, perhaps you have it on your mind as well. Breakfast – we use that word with little awareness of its origin, even though it is not hard to figure it out. It was not until the 15th century that ‘breakfast’ came into use in written English to describe a morning meal, literally a breaking of a fasting period from the previous day.¹ Fasting, as a spiritual practice, is being used less frequently than in the past. We find ourselves still seventeen days until we reach Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent, the time we might hear a mention of or even consider the practice of fasting. And yet, that spiritual practice is the focus of our reading from Isaiah, and I dare say it is timely for such a focus.

This past week was gloomy in several ways and more than a bit chaotic. On Monday were the Iowa caucuses, supposed to be the first voting gauge for who will be political party nominees for the presidential election in November. Results were confused and very slow in being released because of glitches from using a dysfunctional app to tally the votes across the state. Derision from Democrats, Republicans, and political analysts flowed. On Tuesday was the annual State of the Union speech, given this time the evening before the verdict vote on the impeachment trial in the Senate. The speech and the reaction to it were contentious, to put it mildly. On Wednesday was the vote in the Senate acquitting the president of the two articles of impeachment, a vote split almost totally along party lines. There were plenty of comments which followed, showing utter disdain. On Thursday was the National Prayer break fast, Breakfast. This is an annual event that has been held every year since the early 1950’s, organized primarily by evangelical Christians as an attempt to display reconciliation and bridge-building. It devolved into something else, and that has gotten the primary attention.

The keynote speaker at the event, unfortunately, got very little attention for what he presented. Arthur Brooks was the presenter. He is a lay person who is professor of public leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, a Christian, who has written several books on living out the life of faith. He spoke about how Jesus taught love for God and for one another, contrasting that with what he labeled as a major crisis for our nation: the crisis of contempt, a polarization that is tearing our nation apart. He referred to a definition of contempt by a 19th century German philosopher named Arthur Schopenhauer, who wrote that contempt is “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.”² I dare say the reaction to his speech by the president and by political opponents of the president along with reaction to the evangelical event by more progressive or liberal church leaders very clearly illustrated the speaker’s assertion. Contempt flowed and upon a bit of reflection, I have to admit that I too was letting it flow from me. That breakfast reminded me of a phrase that has come into fairly common usage: “eating someone for breakfast.” It means that a stronger and more aggressive person defeats or rolls over someone else and does so with an attitude of contempt.³

When Isaiah was speaking at what may have been some kind of a prayer event, the people were complaining about God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” There seems to be a desire for a transactional relationship with God, one where the people are hoping that if they do A, then God will give them B. But God is not impressed by their expressions of piety, because even though they are living sacrificially in their religious observances, their lives outside of the place of worship do not reflect God’s values. We hear God’s voice in response: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 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.... Is not this 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 to break every yoke? 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? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.”

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus could have easily looked down with contempt upon those in attendance. They seemed to be in the dark about the love of God,

which was to lead to love for one another. But instead of speaking to them in a contemptuous way, he tells them, “You are the light of the world.” We can’t always tell in English whether the word ‘you’ is singular or plural, but in the original Greek language of Matthew’s Gospel, it is clear that he is saying, ‘you all together’ are the light of the world. He wants them to have a vision for what God calls them to be – a collective light for others. Lord knows it was needed then; Lord knows it is needed now. This is an opportunity for us to be involved in showing others that there are better ways to live. However, in order to do so, we are going to have to fast from our feelings and expressions of contempt in order to be a light for others. We are going to have to fast from the easy indifference for those who are struggling in some way in order to reflect the light of God’s love.

You together are the light of the world, Jesus says. There is an old Hasidic tale of a wise rabbi who instructed his students by asking questions. He asked, “How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the dawn has begun?” After thinking for a moment, one student replied, “It is when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and be able to tell if it is a sheep or a goat.” Another student ventured, “It is when there is enough light to see a tree, and tell if it is a fig or an oak tree.” The old rabbi said, “No. It is when you can look into a person’s face and recognize that one as your sister or brother. For if you cannot recognize in another’s face the face of a sister or brother, it is dark indeed and the dawn is distant.”⁴

Our society greatly needs the effective ministry of the church founded by Jesus Christ. If we fast from practicing contempt for those with whom we disagree, but instead recognize them as people of value, as our sisters and brothers; if we fast from indifference toward our kin, yes, our kin who are mired in human need, who are caught in unjust systems, then we can reflect the very break of dawn to those around us. When we hear the term, ‘fast living,’ we tend to think of something else, but if we can carry out the kind of ‘fast living’ described by Isaiah, then we can move toward the result he promises the people of his time. Here is the result he promised them: “then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, 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. 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.” Or as Jesus said, we will be living out our identity as the light of the world. It is time for the right kind of fast living.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breakfast>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/07/arthur-brooks-national-prayer-breakfast-speech/?arc404=true>

³ <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/have+someone+for+breakfast>

⁴ As recounted in Henri Nouwen, Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001, p. 87