

Sermon (Isaiah 58: 1-12, 2/5/17):

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a 100 times, 'I don't go to church because it's filled with hypocrites.'

Inwardly, I know I need to silently count to 10 before answering.

'Think twice before you respond,' my better instincts plead. 'At least this person is being honest. Maybe this is a moment that could lead to some good dialog.'

The difficult thing about such a statement is this. None of us here need to be told this. We'd be the first to admit that, more often than not, we live hypocritical lives. We say one thing here at worship and, probably, before we even get home, there's a fight in the car, a nasty comment about some driver in front of us, or a selfish thought leading to a selfish deed. It's the reason we start out with a prayer of confession. It's our version of an AA meeting where people introduce themselves by saying, 'I'm so-and-so and I'm an alcoholic.'

'Hi, I'm David, a follower of Christ, and I'm a mess. You won't have scratch too deep before you discover how much I miss the mark of being a Christian... Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayer.'

No bones about it, no covering anything up, no dishonesty with ourselves or anyone else. We need help. We need a Savior.

If you're looking for a perfect church filled with perfect people, you've come to the wrong place. If you're a mess too, you'll fit right in. Thankfully Christ seems to like a challenge and we're about as big of a challenge as there is.

'So, what is it that makes you think the church is filled with hypocrites?' I'll ask in my better moments.

'In one breathe they appear to be so pious and in the next they say and do things that, well, are so unchristian like.' They tell me.

Swallow hard, think before you speak, keep the conversation going, be inviting, trust the Spirit, be open to learning something new. It takes discipline, hard work not to succumb to defensiveness.

As difficult and demanding as these encounters are, listening to the Prophet Isaiah's word from the Lord is, to put it mildly, doubly hard to take. From people, we expect it but from God?

‘Shout out!’ God tells Isaiah. ‘Do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet.’

The sound of a trumpet, back in the day of Isaiah, was often a call to battle...a call to rise-up and let them have it. Whoa...I’m thinking *God* needs to swallow hard and count to 10!

After all, it seems to me that things weren’t going all that badly. The Temple was filled with people every week. Standing room only in fact! Oh, what we would give for such a problem!

Before our Christmas eve service, I usually head up to the balcony to clean things up just in case we need it. I want to make sure there’s room for everyone who wants to come. Secretly, there’s also a part of me that hopes we *will* need it. Secretly, I hope that this year we will run out of space and need to open the balcony up. What a boost that would be!

What would it be like to have a standing room only worship service? Come on God. Look on the bright side. Not only are people coming to worship but they seem pretty religious too, carefully tending to the discipline of fasting and other spiritual practices. For us, we call that the good ole days. The days when sanctuaries were full, Sunday school classrooms were running at full tilt, offering plates overflowed, attendance numbers were high, and nobody had to work very hard to get people to come...they just did.

“Day after day they seek me.” God says. “Day after day they come through those Temple doors anxious to know my ways.”

Is that a bad thing God?

‘Okay, let me be blunt.’ The poet continues ‘It’s all a rouse...a show...a hypocritical display of feigned insincerity.’

Ouch. Now that really hurt!

‘Having specific seasons of fasting is all well and good,’ God explains, ‘but it needs to have some effect on who you are. The very nature of fasting is to give something up so that you have something to give away but look at these folks in the Temple. Fasting, looking weak from lack of food, while, at the very same time, treating the people who work for them like dirt. It makes a mockery of worship. They fast but then they go home and quarrel and fight and text and post things on

Facebook and snarl at their neighbor. Is that what it means to bow down and worship? Is that what it means to humble yourself before God?

Okay, God, go ahead and say it. You're not coming anymore because the church is filled with hypocrites.

Clearly, when there's a disconnect between worship and the way we live, it gets God's dander up. I think we also get that message from Jesus when he overturned the tables in the Temple. To walk through the church's doors only to leave here completely unchanged indicates that something is frighteningly wrong. How then should we worship?

It's a difficult question. Worship is not mechanical - enter a code, press a button, and portals open up. We go into it knowing that we are entering a kind of holy mystery like nothing else we have experienced.

Worship is about relationships – being in communion with the Holy and the ones we are called to share this journey of faith with and, as we all well know, relationships are complex and dynamic; continually evolving. Humility is a must.

Here are a few things to consider when we come to worship.

Our approach to worship. In today's day and age, we begin with the odds stacked against us. We are conditioned from an early age, particularly in settings such as this where there's an audience out there and, what looks like, a stage up here, to think that the work of worship is someone else's responsibility. Its success rises and falls on the one who stands on the stage or, in this case, the pulpit. As an audience, our responsibility is minor – the onus of keeping us engaged, of drawing out our participation, of provoking our thoughts, and moving our hearts is the responsibility of the other.

Such an approach leaves us at a distinct disadvantage. The very nature of worship is and always has been communal. It's something we do together. To begin with, our very presence makes a difference and, equally so, our absence is keenly felt. When we make our membership vows, we promise to be a vital part of the worshipping community and there's good reason for that.

As worship begins and I'm standing in the back, it's interesting to note what happens when we stand to sing the first hymn. The first thing

we tend to do, including myself, is look around. We take note of who is here and who is not. We share a smile, nod our appreciation for a friendship we share, and feel a sense of joy when seeing a new face. Our presence here means something. A congregation notices.

From my personal perspective, I can tell you that your presence makes a big difference. I feel it when you are absent. I miss you. It affects what I do up here. Equally so, I feel it when you are here. It encourages me, bolsters me, affects me in many positive ways as it does, I'm sure, others. Showing up here makes a difference in ways that should not be underestimated. Being here is as much a responsibility to the well-being of the whole as it is an individual proclivity.

Also, even though you might not be up here leading worship, your participation in worship is vital.

First off, your prayers are sorely needed. Believe me, standing up here is incredibly challenging and, very often, quite intimidating. I covet your prayers – pray for the efforts I make, the words I speak, the interpretation I make of the scripture text, the role I play in the administration of the sacraments, the prayers I offer. Pray that I get it right and pray that when I get wrong God will somehow wrangle a blessing from the mess I made. Pray that I might have the courage to say what you and I need to hear even when it might not be what we want to hear. The first person I preach to every week is myself and, believe me, there are times, many times, when the text first challenges me in ways that I resist.

Pray for me and, if it's not me up here, pray for the person who is. Pray also for each other. Pray as well for our musicians, our choir, our music director and anyone else whom God has called to lead us in this sacred trust of worship.

Come to worship ready to work. Read the prayer of confession before we pray it together. Reflect on the ways it might apply to you and, if it doesn't, think about how your praying it will help someone else who needs us to pray it with them.

Read over the scripture text before we start.

Risk singing the hymns even if you've convinced yourself or

someone else has convinced you that you can't sing. Do you really think that the quality of our singing matters to God? Sing the hymns, even the ones that might not be familiar to you. After a verse or two, you'll get the hang of it.

Lastly, pay attention to the nudges, thoughts, and feelings that worship leaves you with. On most days, my guess is that nothing here will blow us out of the water but, to be honest, I'm not sure that's the way the Spirit most often works. I think the Spirit tends to be more subtle than that. Maybe it's a song, a word in a prayer, something someone said, the scripture text, something said about the text that made you pause. Pay attention to that pause and let it have its way with you-reshaping you as well as what you do after you leave. Be bold, be courageous, pay attention, let our times of worship together become more than a sporadic hour on Sunday but a way of life.

The Isaiah passage closes with hints of what can happen when worship becomes a vital part of us.

'Your light will break forth like the dawn...' God says. 'Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations for many generations to come; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets you live in.' It's hard to believe worship could be so powerful and influential! It can, though. It's the promise God makes to us. It's what happens when worship moves from just being something we do to who we are.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.