

Futile Fasts and Fries
Epiphany 5A: Isaiah 58.1-12
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I was maybe nine years old when my younger brother Kirk, our neighbor Jeff Butts, and I were eating hamburgers in the back of my grandfather's El Camino, which Dad had borrowed for the afternoon. That sentence might need some explanation, especially for anyone who didn't grow up in the 1970s. If you don't know, the El Camino was a vehicle with an identity crisis. It was a sleek Chevrolet sedan in the front with a pickup bed in the back. Kind of the reverse mullet of cars, now that I think of it. Party in the front, business in the back.

Also, since it was the 1970s, the human race had not evolved enough to realize it is absurd to let children ride in the beds of pickup trucks. So there we were. And at a stop sign a half mile from our house, Jeff thought it would be hilarious to throw a French fry out the back. Which, of course we boys thought it absolutely was. The fry landed a few feet short of the car behind us.

The first signs that something had gone wrong were the angry glare and fist shaking of the driver in the car Jeff had not, for the record, just hit with a French fry. Things grew only more ominous as we realized this guy was actually following us home. Dad pulled into the driveway and met the man, who had sprung from his car, cursing and shouting about what his father would have done to his backside if he'd behaved as we had when he was a boy.

Several things went through my mind. First, I was terrified, because, in our house, no one expressed their displeasure by yelling. Mind you, we had plenty of equally devastating ways to do that work. We just didn't raise our voices. I was also in awe of my father, who calmly but firmly diffused the situation. Even I could see that he was the grownup in the driveway. I also distinctly remember thinking, "So... all those spankings made you into a guy who follows people home so he can yell at their children over a French fry"? Even a nine-year-old could see this was a less than convincing case for corporal punishment.

There's a familiar division among Christians, and, I suspect, among people of other faith traditions as well. Some say religion is about personal salvation and tending to the state of the individual soul. Others would say religion is about calling out and reforming what's gone awry in society more broadly. But the Hebrew prophets seemed to think that both the personal *and* the collective mattered to God. Sometimes they emphasize one aspect more than the other. But a consistent prophetic message seems to be, "Don't be like the French fry guy." Here's what I mean by that. And don't worry. I promise we're eventually going to turn our attention to what an actual prophet named Isaiah actually had to say.

The truth is, I've been the French fry guy and so have you. We've all made raging judgments about what's wrong with the world when in truth, we had some personal work to do. Personal work on the story of how our own souls got to be in the state they're in, which may have a lot more to do with what's wrong with the world than we'd like to admit.

It's unlikely that the guy in the driveway that day got back into his car and said, "Man, what just happened? I need to call my therapist or my sponsor or my pastor or someone who can help me figure out how in the world I got to right here." I say it's unlikely, but I truly hope some

version of that scenario happened, if not that day, then someday. Because maybe his father did hit him as a child. Maybe in those blows he thought he was learning something about justice and righteousness and what it means to be a man. There's a backstory to any particular moment in our lives, isn't there? For better and for worse, there's always a story that leads to who we are right now. And if we want to get from here to someplace better, personally or as a society, there will have to be a better story that takes us from here to that better place, won't there?

Did you notice how easily the prophecy in Isaiah 58 moves back and forth between personal religious practices and the ills of society. After getting our attention with a shout and letting us know that this nation of Israel has gone astray yet again, the prophet says, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice? 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."

Fasting is an ancient practice, and it shows up in all sorts of religious traditions. But with the exception of hunger strikes, fasting isn't usually political. It's more often taken up as a personal practice that cleanses mind and body, sometimes atoning for sin, but often with the goal of a heightened sense of connection with God. But personal transformation should lead to transformed relationships. Isaiah's rage is about people whose personal religious practices stay personal and maybe even become distractions from the needs of those around us.

I know in my own fitful and inconsistent prayer practice, I'm often trying to slow down the gerbils in my rational mind that churn on their wheels under the illusion that they're making some kind of progress with a problem. I think whatever practices help us stop the gerbils and pay keener attention to the present moment, receiving it as a gift from a loving God, are crucial. Mind you, your practices don't have to look like mine and neither of ours has to look just like the fasts that were Isaiah's concern. You might take long walks or rake leaves. Brother Lawrence famously practiced the presence of God by doing the dishes. Ardelle would like me to take up that one with a little more consistency, I know.

But the fasting Isaiah was talking about wasn't only personal. It was a shared practice that the whole community did together. It was one way the Israelites participated in organized religion, if you will. The Hebrew calendar, like Christian calendars would later, even set out special days of fasting. So fasting was a collective practice meant to form Jews as a religious community over time.

I mention this because, as you may have heard, the leading indicators for organized religion haven't been positive in this country for quite a while. And a lot of folks, seeing how a lot of us Christians behave, sound like Isaiah. They wonder what all this religious practice is for if it's not producing people of kindness and justice and hospitality. People who share their bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into their houses and not hide themselves from their own kin, which are all of our sisters and brothers in the human family.

As you and I know, a lot of Christians do these very things. They just don't tend to make the news. But it's also true that we all fail. All of us. We fail to be fully transformed by our practices of personal and collective prayer. And Isaiah's warning is to me, I think, when I take pride when my little timer dings, letting me know I've logged another fifteen minutes of prayer time one morning but fail in my basic responsibilities to my fellow human beings. Christian practice should affect how I work and how I play and what I buy. How I interact with children

and strangers and how I compensate my employees. Transformation isn't real transformation unless it moves outward from our lives and into other lives in visible ways.

Returning to the bad old news about organized religion, though, I think Isaiah would also say that we're fools to believe we can be the people God made us to be without structures and practices in communion with other people. Practices made to form us a little more into who God created us to be over time. Form us into the kinds of people this world happens to need if it is to be healed and made a little more whole.

In a week in which an ice storm imposed a fast on at least some aspects of our daily lives, Tyre Nichols and Vincent Astor were both buried in Memphis. Two very different men with very different stories. But in them we were reminded that the world can be made more affirming and accepting through the life of one small, brave man in a guayabera shirt, and also, tragically, that there is so much more transformation to be done, in us as individuals and within our systems and society.

And, to make it personal, all of this is why I need you. This is why I need church. This is why I need the sacraments. I need practices in community over time that shape me in the ways of Grace. I'm still the French fry guy more often than I want to be, believing I'm setting things right when, in fact, there's a broken story behind too many of my reactions to the world. It may take some personal prayer and meditation to loosen that broken story's grip. But it's also going to take other people. People confessing their sins and failures and then hearing in the hope of absolution that our failures and sins are not all that we are. People receiving the gifts of God as the people of God together, week after week, year after year. And also stopping, maybe even fasting, and asking honestly whether our Christian practices are showing up in our relationships and whether the world around us is becoming a more just and merciful place.

This is the work of church. And this is why it matters that you and I commit first simply to show up to each other in worship, in learning, in service, in friendship. We can't do the deeper work of transformation alone. And we're going to need each other for the long haul if the stories that have formed us are to bend toward the peace and justice of Shalom for which this world was made.

And, remember, friends, that in the end, Isaiah's passion didn't arise from what was wrong. It arose from a glimpse of the Shalom that might be if we remove the pointing of the finger and the speaking of evil. It arose because he saw that when "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." The parched places of your life can be satisfied. Our bones can be made strong.

He saw, and we can see it too, by this wise old prophet's light, that the rebuilding of the ruins of this world, the repairing of its breaches and the restoration of streets in Memphis whose names we know depends on the transformation God can still do, in your life and in mine, when we keep showing up here together, praying here together for a clearer vision of what this world that God so loves might become, and praying for the strength to help that world come to be.