On Becoming a Car

Isaiah 58:1-12 (NRSVUE)
Shout out; do not hold back!
  Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
  to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet day after day they seek me
  and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
  and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
  they want God on their side.
3 "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.
4 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.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
  a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush
  and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
  a day acceptable to the LORD?
6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
  to loose the bonds of injustice,
  to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
  and to break every yoke?
7 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?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
  and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you;
  the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
  you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am." **[The Word of God for the people of God}**

Once again, God is suing Israel for breach of contract.

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers.
4 You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. ...
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Few religious communities have been more diligent about the details of liturgy, the letter of religious law—and they had the laws! Judaism is not just a set

of beliefs about God, man, and the universe. It's a comprehensive way of life, filled with rules and practices that affect every aspect of life: what you do when you wake up in the morning, what you can and cannot eat, what you can and cannot wear, how to groom yourself, how to conduct business, who you can marry, how to observe the holidays and Shabbat, and most important, how to treat God, other people, and animals. All this is known as halacha ("Jewish Law").

Theoretically it's all rooted in Torah, the "Law of Moses;" but, they had a whole subculture of people whose job it was to break down the "Law of Moses," define every word, and describe behavior that would violate or honor that word.

You think our Constitutional Law is complex? The Talmud is a record of the debates of the rabbis as they argued interpretations of Torah between the 2nd and 5th centuries—over two-and-a-half million words. The Mishnah is a similar collection of interpretations of selective legal traditions that were preserved orally dating back at least to the time of Ezra (c. 450 bce), committed to writing, finally, toward the end of the 2nd century, and used as a major source in compiling the Talmud.

But the honoring of halacha was patchy at best. Even priests and curators of Temple protocol were prone to taking bribes and pilfering the offering boxes.

And all of Israel focused on the liturgy and the rules, and overlooked, ignored, or rationalized their way out of what the prophets over and over upheld as God's primary expectation. Isaiah, in today's reading:

...to loose the bonds of injustice,
  to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
  and to break every yoke?
7 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?

A word about letting the oppressed go free: that's not just any prisoner. If you had enough influence, you could have almost anybody imprisoned for almost any reason. The penal system was inequitable and inconsistent—subject to the whims and prejudices of those with power and influence. Many were imprisoned unjustly.

Jesus may have had that Isaiah text in mind when he confronted the legalism of the Temple system: ***"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."*** **(MATT 23:23)**

An author I recently discovered, Robin R. Meyers observes: "Consider this remarkable fact: in the sermon on the Mount there is not a single word about what to believe, only words about what to do and how to be. By the time the Nicene Creed was written, only three centuries later, there is not a single word in it about

what to do and how to be—only words about what to believe."[1]

1700 years later, Western Christianity still focuses on "belief," too often to the neglect of relationships and the servant lifestyle of Jesus. I don't know how many times I've heard or read on social media, "I don't have to go to church…" I don't have to… What's the least I *have to do*? But the statement almost always is, "I don't have to go to church to *believe* in God."

Of course, I have a stake in this, so I can't be totally objective, but what I hear in that statement is, "I don't want to go to church because they'll expect me to do things and attend meetings and learn boring things and it's boring and…" I know there's enough wrong with many manifestations of "church" to rationalize non-participation, and it's just so easy to point to those things that are wrong and say, "See, that's what church is like. It's hypocritical, and I don't want any part of it." I understand. If that's all there were to church, I'd never participate, either. But there also are many valid examples of church that truly seek to follow Jesus and imitate his life. But within three hundred years after the Sermon on the Mount, the Nicene Creed shifted the focus from following Jesus to belief about him. And Western Christianity has been stuck in a belief-only mode ever since.

Isaiah—essentially all the Hebrew prophets—confronted a faith community that had lost any sense of what to do and how to be and focused [some obsessed] on obedience to the liturgical rules and ritual observances. And the prophets unfailingly call the people to return to a faith of living, not just worshiping—a faith of behaving, not just of believing—a faith of obedience, not just consequences.

Jesus didn't discount the value of belief—after all, beliefs become the basis of behavior. Let me watch you closely in your daily routine for a few days, and I'll pretty much know the focus of your beliefs. So, while Jesus didn't discount the value of beliefs, his primary emphasis was on how we live among and how we relate with people. And, like the prophets before him, he was heavy into feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and doing the right thing in relation to the poor. And no matter how you slice that, it's political; and it doesn't match up with some elements of our American political ideology.

Therefore, it's really a hard sell, because people basically, for whatever reason or rationalization eventually confront choices between self and others—choices between private life and community life! And, given changes in ourselves, changes in others, and changes in the environment, none of us can be totally consistent.

Within the first generation of the church, long before the Nicene Creed, the epistle of James was saying, "Faith without works is dead! Show me your faith without your works (and the implication is, "You can't do it.") "Show me your faith

[1] Robin R. Meyers, *Saving God from Religion: A Minister's Search for Faith in a Skeptical Age* (New York: Convergent Books, 2020).

without your works, and I'll show you my faith *BY* my works."

Someone said, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you a car." Let's push that a bit: a car isn't made to sit in a garage all the time. A car has purpose; it's intended to be driven—to carry people and "stuff" from place to place. And yet, a car that's kept in the garage when it's not being driven, will perform better and look better over a longer period of time than a car that sits out in the weather.

Now, the application is obvious; however, for those who may be in denial or who may be looking for loopholes, no, people were not created to sit in church all the time. People were created for a purpose: to be stewards of the earth and to live in mutually loving relationships within the human community. And yet, people who regularly gather with a community of faith will live out that purpose more consistently than people who never gather with a community of faith.

Now, the analogy assumes a good garage and a good community of faith, and we all know that neither all garages nor all communities of faith are in synch with their necessary purpose. But shall we never put our car in any garage because half of them or two-thirds of them or three-fourths of them have leaky roofs and drafty walls and are infested with vermin that chew holes in hoses and wiring and seat covers?

Life would be much simpler if we all could just become cars. Garages are easy to evaluate. Communities of faith, not so much. There are no perfect churches; and it's just easier not to do the hard work of finding a church that's relatively faithful in its effort to follow Jesus.

It's not as if there are no standards by which to discern the presence of God in a community of faith, and a part of our work in our 21 Days of Prayer, and in our Lenten Study, and in our Breakthrough process of discernment is to immerse ourselves—individually and corporately—in those standards and to assimilate them into our life together. Standards like those mentioned in the Isaiah reading today. Standards like the Sermon on the Mount (and particularly the Beatitudes). Standards like Matthew 25. Standards like Jesus response to the question about which is the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself." It's easy to say. May God strengthen us to do it.