"The Fast That I Choose"

Isaiah 58:1-12

Julie R. Harley – First United Church of Oak Park – November 15, 2009

God is a selective listener.

Out of all the words that are spoken in the world, out of all the messages we send, out of all the music we play, out of all the noise that we make, God chooses to listen most acutely to one thing: **God hears the cries of the poor.**

When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, God spoke with compassion for Hebrew slaves. "I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt. **I have heard their cry** on account of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings. I have come down to deliver them from slavery, and to bring them a land flowing with milk and honey. **The cry of the Israelites has come to me.**" (Exodus 3:7-9)

God has a selective sense of hearing.

When God spoke to the prophets, God was moved by compassion for the poor. Isaiah confronted people with this charge: "**Let the oppressed go free . . . share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house**, and when you see the naked, cover them." (Isaiah 58:6-7)

God has a selective sense of hearing.

When Jesus gave his first sermon at his home synagogue in Nazareth, he opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me **to bring good news to the poor.**" (Luke 4:18) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke with compassion in his heart, "**Blessed are the poor**, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Luke 6:20)

In the earliest Christian communities that worshiped together after Jesus' resurrection, believers shared their money and possessions in common. When someone had a need, others gave of their wealth to assist them.

In the book of James, we hear a stinging critique of the rich, who accumulate wealth by paying poor wages to their workers. "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted, your garments are moth-eaten, and your gold and silver have rusted. The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out. **And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."** (James 5:1-4)

God is a selective listener. God hears the cries of those who are poor.

I'm sure God pays attention to our hymns of praise. I'm certain that God appreciates an orchestra performing Handel's "Messiah" or a bagpipe playing "Amazing Grace." I'm confident that God hears the family blessing spoken before dinner or a child's prayer at bedtime.

But the sound that touches the heart of God more than any other is the voice of one who suffers.

What about us? What do we hear? Out of all the words that are spoken from our TVs, radios, computers and headphones; out of all the emails, texts, magazines and catalogs that inundate our inboxes; out of all the noise that surrounds us: what do we listen to most acutely?

Do **we** listen for the cries of the poor?

It is hard to hear those voices. It's not because there are so few poor people in our world: almost half the world's population lives in poverty, existing on less than $2 a day.

It is hard to hear their voices because poverty allows them no voice, no lobby, no website, no political power. They are not photogenic, slick, or media-savvy. And it is easy to overlook the poor, because we are focused on our own comfort and satisfaction: caring for our families; keeping our jobs; maybe getting the newest I Phone or HD TV.

The message of the prophet Isaiah comes to us as a minority report in a world dominated by news from places of affluence: the halls of Washington, the towers of academia, the boardrooms of wealthy corporations, the fantasy world of celebrities, advertising, entertainment and professional sports.

This God who hears the cries of the poor does not side with the insiders, but sides with the outsiders.

This God we know through the prophet Isaiah and his contemporaries Amos, Micah and Jeremiah, is a fierce advocate for economic justice.

And we are deeply offended.

Picture this scene. It is the 8th century BCE. The Israelites are gathered in worship for a day of religious fasting, a time of national repentance. They have returned from exile in Babylon and are back in their homeland, but still subject to the dictates of foreign rulers. They humble themselves before God, kneeling on the floor, stretched out on sackcloth (a type of burlap). They cover their skin with ashes, as a sign of their sorrow. They pray to God, but hear no answer.

Isaiah bursts into the assembly, walking angrily down the aisles, speaking on behalf of God: "Is this the fast that I choose?" The worshipers are shocked by his intrusion, but Isaiah continues, his voice dripping with contempt.

"What good is this piety, when tomorrow you will go out and oppress those who work for you? What good are your prayers, when you are mostly concerned with serving your own interests? What good is your reverence, when you will leave here and begin to quarrel and fight to get more for yourself, starting wars? This is nothing but an empty drama.

"What good are these rituals, when you are just going through the motions – trying to get God's attention for yourself? You spend the rest of your days pointing fingers at others, slandering their reputations, doing nothing for those who are truly in need. You hypocrites!

"Don't you hear the cries of the poor? Don't you remember what it was like to be hungry yourself, during the 40 years that our ancestors followed God through the wilderness? Don't you remember the years you had no homes, but slept in tents?

"God will not listen to you, as long as you turn your back on those in need. God will hear you, but **only under these conditions**. THIS is the fast that God chooses: to release the bonds of injustice, to break the yoke of oppression, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your houses."

Their religious fasting was designed to get **God's attention**. But the fasting Isaiah requires is directed toward **people**.

The fast that God chooses forces us to change the way we live, depriving ourselves of what we could otherwise enjoy ourselves, for the sake of someone else. The fast that God chooses puts our personal comfort on the line. And that is why we are offended.

A prophet's job is to shock people, to attract attention. A prophet's job is to criticize and energize. They don't mince words. They cut to the chase. The prophets

hold up a mirror to our rituals and routines and show us the cold, hard truth: We are so well off that we no longer notice other people's hunger. We have insulated ourselves from the voices of the poor.

But this is the prophetic word of Isaiah: **those who neglect the poor and oppressed are not God's people at all** – no matter how frequently we practice our religious rituals or how orthodox our creeds and confessions.

In the last year, our world has experienced a financial crisis that stimulated trillions of dollars in government bailouts and many personal and institutional losses. All of us have felt the impact, including our congregation's endowment funds. The Archbishop of Canterbury in England recently called upon those who work in the financial industry to repent.

He hasn't found a lot of bankers who are willing to say they're sorry, let alone change their practices. More often, what they are doing is defending their actions and justifying their policies.

Goldman Sachs is planning to pay $16.7 billion in compensation to its chief executives this year. The company also offered to donate $200 million to a foundation, as a sop to critics. I can hear Isaiah's voice now: "Is this the fast that I choose?" Will a relatively modest donation to others make up for the obscene bonuses that executives are giving to themselves?

There are no easy answers. Economic injustice has been with us for centuries, and it is tempting to shrug our shoulders and point to Jesus' words: "You will always have the poor with you." (Matt. 26:11) It is simpler to focus our judgment on **individual** sins---Bernie Madoff's greed or a corrupt politician---rather than looking at **social sins** that are created by complex structures in society which foster and tolerate poverty.

The battle for justice is fought against long-term, structural evil and distorted, immoral social systems: the factors that feed into the achievement gap, crime, drug use, and economic disparity. Winning this war takes more than money. It takes moral commitment, theological and political wisdom, and long-term vision.

It takes people like us who are committed to something more radical than simply social change: our purpose is to usher God's new reality into this world.

What is the fast that we choose, as members of First United Church?

We have committed ourselves to a year of mission focus on the needs of the hungry. Last week we wrote letters to our legislators about world hunger. Today and

next Sunday we will bring in donations for the food pantry. We are planning a mission trip early next year to volunteer at the Greater Chicago Food Depository. We have committed offering money and endowment money to support hunger ministries.

As we prepare for the holiday season, the Alternative Christmas Store will be opening in two weeks to provide gift-giving opportunities that bring justice for the poor, rather than simply adding to our own affluence.

One week from tomorrow, we will be giving out hundreds of turkeys to people who will line up at our food pantry. Right now we don't have enough volunteers to do this work. Will you say YES and share your time in mission?

We have made space in our church home for the Walk-In Ministry and the Food Pantry and for the PADS homeless shelter. But could we do more? Could we move beyond charity to seek real justice?

When an individual or a family in our community lacks food, there is more to the problem than simple hunger. If we listen to their voices, we find that personal charity is not adequate to solve their problems.

A family who comes to our food pantry may lack food because of a medical emergency . . . for which they have no health insurance . . . which they cannot buy because the head of household has limited job skills . . . and he can't move forward because his public assistance is about to run out . . . and he can't get a job of any kind because unemployment is rising and no decent-paying job is available.

We may offer this family a generous supply of food, but the long-term help they need to overcome hunger requires many things: the support of a community of faith, referral, encouragement, coaching, and ultimately public policy decisions that will enable them to have access to health care and a living wage.

The fast that God chooses means First United Church will have to work with other partners to bring about changes so that families in our community can live responsibly without depending on charity.

Economic justice is the fast that God chooses.

We can't make that happen through worship and education alone. We can't do it through mission alone.

We can do this only with the help of God, being unapologetically Christian.

We can do this only with the full commitment of every member of this congregation: no spectators allowed. Everyone has to be on the team.

We can do this only if we are willing to do what is unpalatable.

We can do this only if we see it as God's vision, not our own.

We can do this only if we focus our mission efforts very keenly on this place and time, working in partnership with other congregations, not-for-profits, and government agencies.

Isaiah begins his prophecy with criticism, but he ends with a vision of hope.

When we live with love and justice, we can become a beacon of faith in our community and the world.

Isaiah says, "Your light shall break forth like the dawn, your healing shall spring up quickly.

"The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard." (Isaiah 58:8, NRSV)

"I will always show you where to go. I've give you a full life in the emptiest of places—firm muscles, strong bones.

"You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry.

"You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past.

"You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again." (Isaiah 58:11-12, from "The Message")

Are we listening? There is an answer to hunger in our time. What fast will you choose? Amen.