Sermon by Shea Tuttle

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Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

Isaiah 58 is one of those Bible passages I’ve loved in a vague sort of way for a long time. What’s not to love? Some indictments to make you feel a little guilty (and we Presbyterians find a little guilt rather pleasant, don’t we?), followed by some encouragement toward justice to fire us up, along with the assurance that that makes God happy. As a bonus, we get some useful judgments against ritual that’s just performance—“Is this the kind of fast I choose?”—and who *doesn’t* want a good excuse to *not* give up chocolate for Lent this year?

 This week, in preparation for being with you, I’ve spent a little more time with this passage than in the past. And to be fair, I wasn’t wrong. It’s a real buffet. Its highs are delicious; its lows are devastating. It starts with “Shout loudly; don’t hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet!” Okay, great! I feel myself responding. What good word should I announce like a fanfare? “Announce to my people their crime, to the house of Jacob their sins.” Oh. It’s going to be like this.

 “They seek me day after day,” God says, “like a nation…that *didn’t* abandon their God.” Then God mocks us a little bit. “Why do we fast and you don’t see; why afflict ourselves and you don’t notice?”

 “You liars,” God says. Okay, that part isn’t really in there, but that’s the idea. “On your fast day, you do whatever you want.” That doesn’t sound too much like a fast day. “You oppress all your workers. You quarrel and brawl…you hit each other violently with your fists.”

 “Is this the kind of fast I choose?” God asks. Well, by this point the question seems rhetorical, doesn’t it?

 Fasting, God says, when done rightly—righteously—looks like other things: releasing restraints, setting free the mistreated, feeding the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked, and not hiding from your own family. It’s a tall order, but here’s where the passage turns soaring: *Then* your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord’s glory will be your rear guard. *Then* you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will call for help, and God will say, “I’m here.”

 Now, as nice as that sounds, this part of the passage seems to suggest, if I dare use the phrase these days, a quid pro quo. If you act justly, God says, I will hear your cries. And I’m a little uncomfortable with this, to be honest with you. As a Presbyterian, I believe we are, frankly, hopeless. Too broken to reliably choose goodness, and therefore utterly dependent on the mercy of God. Any goodness, any light, any salvation better be up to God, not us, because if it’s up to us, we’re sunk.

 But a closer look reveals something a little more complicated than a simple quid pro quo. Here’s this fascinating sentence one more time: “Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord’s glory will be your rear guard.” There’s something cooperative going on here. Your work for justice creates a presence to announce and protect you, to “walk before you,” in a similar way to how the Lord’s glory goes behind you. Your work for justice becomes its own witness, its own light. It isn’t quite as simple as, you do good, so God gives you light. The goodness *is* the light. “*You* *are* the salt of the earth,” Jesus says in today’s gospel. “*You* *are* the light of the world.” “Let your light shine before people,” he says, “so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.”

 Okay, so that’s Isaiah and Jesus. Let’s talk about Mister Rogers—especially since that’s why you all invited me here to begin with. The center of Mister Rogers’ ministry was the phrase he used all the time: “I like you just the way you are.” For Mister Rogers, this statement had a theological core, a gospel core: that God loves us just the way we are. God’s love, for Fred Rogers, Presbyterian minister, is unequivocal, unconditional, fundamental. The very first thing, the very last thing, the everywhere in between thing he wanted children and adults to know was this: you are loved, you are loved, you are loved. That’s it. You’ve just received the sum total of his 30 years 900 episodes of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*.

 But also, that wasn’t all. Mister Rogers, you might know, was pretty interested in growing. All of his work was in the service of helping children—and adults too—grow into the best versions of who they might become.

 You are lovable just the way you are, period. And also, let’s grow. There’s something cooperative going on here. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord’s glory will be your rear guard. Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

 Or as 1 Corinthians 3 puts it succinctly, we are God’s coworkers.

 Okay, so coworkers in what? Toward what goal are we laboring? Justice, freedom, compassion, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked—all of these are named in Isaiah. But it’s the end of the passage that captured me this week, the final named result of justice work. “You will be called Mender of Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets.”

 It’s important to know that this part of Isaiah comes from the time of the exile. God’s people are scattered. They have lost their homeland. Some—the powerful ones—have been carted off into captivity. Some have been left behind in a land that is now occupied by their enemies. The promised land has been lost, and the people of God have been separated from their places of worship and from each other—it must feel as though they have been separated even from God.

 And now the voice of God, as represented by the prophet, tells them that if they do justice, if they share, clothe, release, if they cultivate the kind of righteousness that will manifest in light and presence to walk before them—They will be Menders of Broken Walls. They will be Restorers of Livable Streets. All that’s been lost in exile? God says, Your righteousness can mend and restore it.

 To me, having spent the last few years with Mister Rogers, mending broken walls and restoring livable streets sounds an awful lot like building a neighborhood. Neighborhoods, for Fred Rogers, were places where people were loosed and fed and welcomed. Neighborhoods, when built with loving intention, were places that bound the wounds of racism and war, that modeled inclusion, that yearned toward the kingdom of God.

 His life testified that we do it together—we and God. I promise you that Fred was as imperfect as you or me, but he was willing to cowork with God, to choose the kind of fast that led to people all over the country—people of different colors, different genders, different abilities, different beliefs—seeing themselves represented in the neighborhood, hearing themselves proclaimed lovable, witnessing the mending of brokenness and the restoration of life in an odd little place called Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.

It’s easy to remember Mister Rogers and his neighborhood as cute, trite, simple. But they weren’t. And the work wasn’t easy. “Don’t let anybody ever tell anybody that it was easy,” Fred himself wrote once when struggling to write new episodes. “It wasn’t.” It’s a fast, after all. It’s self-denial. But to choose it, God says through the prophet, is to choose the light of noonday, a blaze against the darkness, water that won’t run dry.

Where may we be called, I wonder, to mend and restore the neighborhoods we frequent? May we risk the fast, may we commit to the work, may we be salt and light in a bland, dark world. And may we co-labor with God in the building of the kingdom—the very neighborhood of God. Amen.