***WEEKDAY WORSHIP***

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Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:14-16

In the north of Scotland there was a time when it was not unusual for dogs to come to worship alongside their masters. Shortly after the Highland Clearances in the 19th century Donald McLeod attended a service in the Kildonan Church in which the whole congregation consisted of eight shepherds and twenty sheep dogs. At another Highland church the dogs sat patiently through the long service each week, but when the congregation rose for the benediction, the dogs would stretch and begin barking so excitedly that sometimes the benediction could not be heard. The elders finally decided that the service really ought to close in a more dignified manner, so the following Sunday a visiting minister found to his surprise that the people were still sitting when it was time for the benediction. He hesitated and waited for them to rise, but they remained stolidly in place. There was an awkward silence and finally one old shepherd spoke up and said, “Carry on minister. We’re just sitting to mislead the dogs!”

Those who returned from exile in Isaiah’s day were not trying to mislead any dogs with their worship, but there was still a whole lot of misleading going on. On the surface things looked pretty good. The people were fasting, and humbling themselves in sackcloth and ashes, and praying to God, but it seemed that God hadn’t noticed. Life had not improved substantially and the people were a little miffed that God seemed to be ignoring their righteous worship. They thought they were doing enough to garner God’s favor and be rewarded with God’s blessing, but a divine response seemed lacking. So in good Israelite tradition, they whined:

*Why do we fast, but you do not see?*

*Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?*

What was the point of going through the motions of worship if the people were reaping no benefit for it? God had misled them into thinking that their pious worship made a difference!

But it was not God who was doing the misleading, nor God who would be misled. The people of Israel were misleading themselves. They thought they were doing what God wanted with their pious worship and fasting, but they were offering only the form of worship, not the substance. They said the right things and went through the motions, but the Lord saw through their pious actions to their hearts and recognized they were doing some of the right things for all the wrong reasons. And the rest of the week, their lives reflected little of the faithfulness to which God had called them. They were fasting in order to be seen by others, humbling themselves in order to garner blessing from God, and then going out and living as they selfishly pleased, without a thought of what the Lord might require of them. They practiced piety but did not live righteously, and God called them to account for it. “*Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, says the Lord, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God*.” God knows us better than we know ourselves, and God will not be misled!

“*You are the light of the world*,” says Jesus. “*Let your light shine before others…*” Too often the light that shines from us is but a dim glow, a bare flicker of the light of the Lord. Jesus does not say let your light glow dimly; he says, “*Let your light shine!* It is light that is to shine, not just within these walls as we sing our praises and recite the creed and come to this table on Sundays. It is light that is to shine every day of the week wherever we are. “*Share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house and clothe the naked*,” shouts Isaiah, “*then your light shall break forth like the dawn*.” Our light shines when we are living into God’s call to love our neighbors and to serve the last and the least. It shines when we are living as God calls us to live and loving as God calls us to love and forgiving as God calls us to forgive on a daily basis.

After an evening conversation with friends about poverty and the outrageous number of preventable deaths of children around the world, Luke, the young son of Jim and Joy Carroll Wallis, was clearly moved by what he had heard. At bedtime, as his dad tucked him in and prayed with him, little Luke said, “*Lord I pray for the 30,000 children who will die tomorrow… Please don’t let them die… Well, I know that’s not possible, so please let them have their best day ever… But of course it won’t be their best day ever… so… Lord, please help us to stop this from happening*.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

*Help us to stop this!* For the light to break forth like the dawn we must be willing to act, to ***do*** something in order to carry that light out into the world:

to those in need,

to those who mourn,

to those who despair,

to those who are in conflict,

to those children who are dying.

The light shines through our hands, our hearts, our voices, our lives, and our life together. It does not shine apart from us; it shines through us for all the world to see.

Last Wednesday Robert Cunningham, a Metro worker in southeast Washington, was shot and killed as he put himself between a woman and a gunman who was terrorizing passengers at the Potomac Avenue Metro station. “*This is the thing with Bob*,” said a neighbor of Cunningham’s for over 30 years, “*I wouldn’t want to get on his bad side, and I don’t mean that as if he would hurt anybody. He sees an injustice, and he wants something done about it. I’m not surprised one bit that he would step forward to say, ‘Look, you know, you can’t be harassing this lady*.’”[[2]](#endnote-2)

I wonder if anyone would say such a thing about us – when they see an injustice, they do something about it. When they see someone who is hungry, they feed them. When they see someone whose clothes are threadbare, they get clothing for them. When they see someone in need, they help. Too often when we see injustice or hunger or gun violence or homelessness, we lament the problem or discuss it in depth, but do nothing more. We are too apathetic or indifferent or fearful or feel too powerless to do anything.

Mahatma Gandhi suggests that one of the seven deadly social sins is worship without sacrifice. The sacrifice God expects from us is not some ritual offering, but the offering of our lives through which God’s light shines. The light was shining brightly through Bob Cunningham at that Metro Station this week. And that light should shine through us as well. It shines when we forgive others, but it shines dimly when we hold grudges against our neighbors. The light shines when we speak the truth in love, but it is dimmed by gossip or racial slurs or self-righteous judgment of neighbors. The light shines when we love one another, but it is dimmed when we selectively choose the “other” we will love. The light shines when we are faithful, but it is dimmed

by the spouse who cheats on a spouse and

by the student who cheats on a test and

by the business that cheats its customers.

It is dimmed by those who pray for peace but won’t work for peace, by those who pray for the poor but ignore their needs, by those who pray for justice but enjoy the fruits of injustice, by those who lament structural racism but do nothing to change the structures, by those who decry poverty but do nothing to change the systems that perpetuate it. It is dimmed by those who come to worship anxious to put in their time and then get on with the rest of the day. It is dimmed by us when we do the wrong things and when we do the right things for the wrong reasons. If we expect God to reward us for pious worship within these walls, then we deceive ourselves beyond even those shepherds misleading the dogs in the Highland church aisles. We deceive ourselves further if we think that we can mislead God. “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory – not to you – but to your Father in heaven*,” says Jesus.

Last year we committed to being a Matthew 25 congregation which means we commit to serving God by addressing significant needs in the world, particularly issues of congregational vitality, systemic poverty, and structural racism. We did not commit to just talk about those problems, but to address them in concrete, difference-making ways. In so doing, our light shines, and the questions is really: how brightly will it shine? Will it shine like the sun at dawn or like the flicker of a single dying flame? Our light shines when we worship God every day of the week with the kind of worship God asks of us – doing justice and practicing kindness, loving our neighbors and serving those in need. That is how our light shines! Like the sun breaking forth at the dawn on a cloudless day, that is how we shine! Amen

1. Joy Carroll Wallis, *Faith Forward: A Dialogue on Children, Youth and a New Kind of Christianity* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Metro, friends mourn worker hailed as hero”, Justin George, *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2023, p.B1 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)