

“Sharing My Life with Others”
Isaiah 58:9-12; Philippians 2:1-4;
Matthew 5:13-16, 12:46-50

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Selfish ambition. Sometimes when I read scripture there are some words that might stand out to me. In reading some of these passages today, a couple of the words that stood out and that go together were those words “selfish ambition.” I began to wonder how much of the time selfish ambition plays a role not only in my own life but in the life we have together.

We certainly have some examples of places where selfish ambition has shown up. Enron was a few years ago, but it was a company that was based on selfish ambition and greed to get to the top and ended up causing a lot of problems in the California electric market. A lot of people lost money when it crashed and burned. Most of its leadership either ended up in jail or died, maybe from the stress of it all.

More recently there was a guy named Martin Shkreli, who bought a drug and then the next day took it from \$13.70 to \$750.00 just because now he owned it. It was a drug that some people needed if they had a parasite and needed that healing.

What I’m saying is that we have a good number of examples. We could probably go on and look at more. I think there has even been a movie or two made about the selfish ambition that is part of our culture, part of our society. Sometimes I wonder if there is a way that I am *not* touched by it.

I don’t know how much of that selfish ambition is just built into the fabric of our society, but it feels like all of us, however humble we are, should have the ambition to be a king, to be something so much greater than we are. Sometimes that leaves us feeling inadequate. We are always supposed to be something greater. It also, I think, causes us some struggles. The main thing I’m thinking about is how prevalent that is in our world and yet how clearly in a scripture like today’s we are invited to let go of that selfish ambition. Instead of a selfish ambition, it invites us to replace that selfish ambition with a sharing of our lives, a sharing of the very grace and goodness of God that God has given us. To come in humility. To come and be a community of the Spirit.

As we begin to think about what it means to share of ourselves, there are many places in scripture that try to invite us to hear what God’s will is for us. The passage from Isaiah is simply one of those. And yet, it is instructive sometimes to walk through such a passage. Here are both Eugene Peterson’s translation from The Message and the NRSV translation of a few verses from Isaiah.

If you get rid of unfair practices, don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage.

It sounds a lot like the Philippians passage about not putting self ahead. Maybe there’s something consistent about the way scripture invites us to recognize the will of God.

Quit blaming the victims, or speaking evil.

An invitation to change the way we're doing things. It's incredible to me that perhaps the scripture knows us pretty well because it's so easy to simply want to take my problems and blame somebody else for them. Yet, scripture is inviting us not to do that.

Or, it says *Quit gossiping about other people's sins*, or (in the NRSV) *pointing the finger*.

Again it feels like the Bible gets pretty close to home. It's so easy, in fact sometimes it's hard not to point the finger at somebody else and say, "What's wrong with them?" Is it some sense of power that we get from that? Is it some way of trying to make ourselves be better, look better? Anyway, this passage is inviting us to recognize that the will of God is that we not do these things.

Instead be generous with the hungry.

I wonder, at this point, if it's speaking about only those who hunger for physical food. That's enough. There is struggle enough with getting everybody healthy, nutritious food that they can actually have. But what about the hunger of the soul or of the spirit? What about a hunger for a sense of place, of care, of love? What about a place to be and be known? Even Isaiah goes on to say, "Give yourself to the down and out, or to the afflicted."

It's caring for those who are struggling. How can we do that? It's more than just giving somebody food at that point. It's thinking about their lives and what we can do for them. There's a promise in there as well that if we do that, if we try to follow God's will, God will work with us and change us and give us a glow that changes the darkness, or as the NRSV talks about it, the gloom will be dispelled and become like the noonday.

It's an invitation to let go of some things and try some other things. If you look at those, they generally tend to be letting go of things that are hard on people and doing things that care for people.

I am always caught up short by this particular verse in Philippians, because it says if you've gotten anything out of Christ, if you've gotten anything out of the gift of being part of a family of faith, of being part of a community of the Spirit, don't make it about your differences. Eugene Peterson translates it as, "Agree with one another." I think really what it means is that we don't have to all think exactly the same thing but we have to come to some kind of shared perspective. We have to come to some way of understanding that we're all children of God and that God's love is what we need to share with one another. Even if we don't all agree on everything else, love each other and be deep-spirited friends.

It feels like that invites us to move beyond a simple caring for one another in the family of faith and finding a way to care at a deeper level, to understand that God's grace takes us into a community that isn't just a community of people gathered in the same place and thus forced to figure out how to do things together because they are in the same place. Rather, it's an invitation to pay attention to one another in a way that

cares that we're together and invites us to share our lives and to share our lives deeply and broadly.

Indeed, when Jesus is speaking in the Sermon on the Mount, he's not just talking about us sharing our lives in a community of faith. He's inviting us to be light and salt to the world, to bring something the world can taste. There's something so physical about that. There's something so real about that. We actually are engaged in the world and bring the light as well, a light that dispels the shadows and gloom and helps us see the goodness and the grace and the fullness of life God is inviting us to. I think that we can see that's been true. Christians recognized that their calling is to show the good works of God, and through that, give glory to God.

This is a quote from Julian the Apostate in 360. Julian was a Roman Emperor who was trying to reinvigorate the Roman gods and the Roman way of doing things. He was frustrated that the Jews and particularly the Galileans (Christians) were getting more and more adherents. More people were becoming Christian. Here's what he said: "Why then do we think that it is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of the dead, and their sobriety of lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause, ...for it is disgraceful that no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans support our poor in addition to their own. Everyone is able to see that our co-religionists are in want."

He recognizes that his religion is not doing well because it is not helping the very people who need help the most. But those dratted Christians are helping everybody—not only the people in their faith communities. They are helping everyone, particularly the poor.

Sometimes it feels a little bit like when we want to shine the light of Christ, it's like we have a torch we want to use and sometimes it feels a little like some people don't notice that we're holding the torch. Sometimes it feels like we press the light into people's faces. But it's not about burning somebody; it's about helping people see. It's providing the instances of grace.

The pastor that followed me in Lake City recognized that there was a young man in the community named Zack whose parents had disappeared and left him to be part of the state system. They took Zack in and adopted him and gave him the opportunity he needed to be the full human being he could be, to recognize the grace of God in his life.

I think about the story Jesus tells about Lazarus the beggar at the rich man's gate. It makes me wonder about our problem with the poor at our gate, the refugee and the migrant, and how we are treating them. Read the story in Luke, Chapter 12, about Lazarus and the rich man.

We need a God who can take our struggles. Sometimes our lives don't feel quite this undone, and yet oftentimes I recognize the need for a refurbishing, a renovating of my life, for a rebuilding and a renewal of my life. That's what Isaiah is talking about. If we open up to God and walk in God's will and God's way, God will help renovate, renew, and rebuild us.

It's really a pretty basic message. The children at VBS this year heard it. It's pretty straightforward. God loves us all—that was the first day. God cares for us all and will be there for us. God loves us even when others don't. That's an invitation for us to do the same. God loves us so much he sent his only Son, and God wants to share this love with others.

We are working through the spiritual disciplines: worship, opening ourselves to God, relinquishing the false self, and today, sharing ourselves with others. Sharing the love and grace of God that God has given us. If God loves us all and we've been given that love, we are invited to share it. That's a spiritual discipline—following God's will for us. It's pretty simple and straightforward in terms of the VBS message, anyway. It may be a little harder to implement. Then, the promise is that we will become a community of the Spirit. Or, and I love Isaiah's imagery, we will become a well-watered garden. A well-watered garden is full of vibrancy, full of produce. It's a fullness of life that is living out its meaning and purpose just as we are invited to live out our meaning and purpose as followers of Christ, sharing the very love and grace of God. Amen.