

Do the right thing; a sermon on Isaiah 58. October 1, 2017, Rev. Rosalind Gnatt

Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. When you don't oppress anyone or point your finger, speaking evil against them, then your light and health will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your righteousness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will go behind you.

Then when you call, the Lord will answer. 'Yes, I am here.'

"Remove the heavy yoke of oppression, stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors! Feed the hungry and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon. The Lord will guide you continually, giving you water when you are dry and restoring your strength. You will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring. Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a builder of walls and a restorer of homes.

Feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, be generous with your relatives, help those in trouble: Matthew 25 comes to mind. I love Matthew 25 and its vivid image of the last judgment: the ones God chooses to enter the kingdom have no idea what they did to deserve it. What did we do, and when did we do it, they ask? The answer: what you've done to the neediest – the least – of my children, you've done to me. Awesome, isn't it? Of course, on the other side of the coin are the ones who get sent into the eternal fire. They too had no idea what they hadn't done: "What didn't we do; when didn't we do it?"

Just do it: that's what the prophet is trying to get across. Don't stop to weigh the consequences of practicing kindness: be kind. Don't worry about what the kid with the spikey hair is going to do with the 20 cents in your pocket – just give it. The great Jewish sage, Maimonides taught that there are eight levels of charity. The highest is to make it possible for a struggling person to stand on his or her own feet. Giving to a person we don't know and who doesn't know us is the second-best kind of charity; not for the good of the person, but for the good of our own soul. The third level is when one knows to whom one gives, but the recipient does not know the benefactor. The sages used to walk about in secret and put coins in the doors of the poor so as not to embarrass the poor person. The last – the lowest level of charity, is when one gives unwillingly. Still, that's better than nothing - Practice makes perfect and practicing generosity makes it a habit. It's good for our spiritual health to be generous.

Prohibited from nearly every other trade, some Jews began to occupy an important economic niche as moneylenders in the Middle Ages. The Church condemned lending money for interest, but the law only applied to Christians. It was a convenient arrangement for the Church to allow this particular trade to the Jews.

In the 1700s, there was a man who lived in the Jewish ghetto of Frankfurt. Like all ghettos, it was airless, cramped and crowded. Poverty and hunger were well known. This man was in the business of arranging loans for the good Christians who lived outside the ghetto walls. He never went out of the house where his family had lived for 200 years, the Red Shield House, without having an ample amount of coins in his pockets. His reason: God had blessed him with a way to provide for his family. With blessing comes responsibility. Share; just do it.

You know those conversations that start in our heads when we see someone on the sidewalk with a cup or cap in hand.

Those conversations never make us feel better – we know what they're really about: we're trying to justify to ourselves the act of ignoring a fellow human being who is asking us for help. Yes, I know: there are so many of them... the people begging for money. Believe me, I've had plenty of those conversations in my head too. But I increasingly find them too exhausting: it takes so much energy to make excuses to oneself. At some point, I just started making eye contact with the beggars and the buskers. Even with no change in one's pocket, making eye contact is how we say, "I see you." I think the worst thing must be to feel invisible. And ignoring someone, whether a spouse or a person sitting on the sidewalk, takes so much emotional energy.

What else do we have to gain from paying attention to people who need something from us? The prophet tells us, if we reach out to help, if we just do it instead of making excuses, *our light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness will be bright as noon*. What a relief! Spiritual energy released into the darkness of this world.

And listen again to what the prophet says we can do with that energy, that light: for example, *some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities. Then you will be known as a rebuilders of walls and a restorer of homes*.

What deserted ruins would you hope to rebuild? Let me tell you what I intend to rebuild: The great commandments from the Hebrew and the Christian writings are identical: love God; love your neighbor as you love yourself. I have a brain injury – lack of oxygen at birth damaged a part of the brain on the right side. The longer I live, the more I realize what a blessing in disguise this annoying injury is. It requires that I love myself enough to get the kind of exercise and physical therapy I need – not occasionally; every day.

When I moved to Wiesbaden over 4 years ago, I stopped loving myself. Excited, overwhelmed and determined to do a good job in my work here, I forgot what my body needs to stay healthy. The mental focus of living in the world of two languages became harder to maintain.

On the evening of September 11th, I arrived, exhausted, in Texas for a 2-week visit with my family. Whether it was luck or fate, I don't know. Strangely, the exact training studio that I needed was almost around the corner from my daughter's house. Seek and you will find. I saw this as a sign; my first priority when I returned to Wiesbaden, would be to stop making excuses. Our bodies are, as Paul says, the temples of our spirits. Carelessness with one's physical body stifles the potential for that light within us. Without this light, we are spiritually handicapped. When I was a child, I wore a brace and was called handicapped. I now see that the handicap is my inattention to the temple of my soul. The excuses for being stingy with my physical self are about the same as my excuses

for being stingy with strangers who would be grateful for a few cents from me.

This is a big wake-up call for me – and I hope it has been worth your while to sit through this long sermon. Our imperfect, ageing, ornery bodies are nevertheless the temples of our souls. Our souls are the seat of our kinship with the great, eternal One – the source of light. We can't make our light shine – we have to let it shine; through our care for ourselves and our care for the world.

Amen