

On True Fasting

Sermon for the Last Sunday before Lent

Sermon Text: Isaiah 58:1-9a



“Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. ² Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ³ ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶ ‘Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”

“What am I not allowed to eat during the season of Lent? Or how do Christians fast? Most people who ask such things are probably disappointed because I can’t exactly prescribe what one may eat or drink during Lent. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself didn’t give direct instructions on what one may or may not do during the Lenten season. Jesus even criticized fasting just like the prophets did. You can’t view fasting as a type of business deal with God. In other words: If I fast for a certain amount of time, or if I pray for a

certain amount of time, then surely God must do something good for me to reward me? This idea is fundamentally wrong because we can't buy the Almighty God through our vain efforts. The idea that one must buy God with one's deeds has been around for ages and was very widespread among the Israelites. After the Persian king Cyrus freed the Israelites and allowed them to return to Israel, the Israelites wanted to impress God with their actions: Because the return to Jerusalem was not easy, because the rebuilding of the city was extremely difficult... and that's why the Israelites fasted more and more so that God would be on their side. When that didn't work, they wanted to know from God: "What did we actually do wrong?" Some even said: "We did everything right. Therefore, it must be God's fault that things are so bad for us." On the outside, everything looked to be fine with the Israelites: they went to worship, they prayed, they made sacrifices, and they daily called on God. But the more they prayed, or so it appeared, the more everything went wrong. The more they sacrificed, the less God seemed to give ear to their prayers... It got even worse, and the Israelites began to beat and exploit and insult one another. That was hypocritical business. They constantly sacrificed and prayed, and yet they treated their neighbors so much harder and unkindly. With the one hand, they brought God sacrifices and with the other they tore the bread out of their neighbors' mouths! That's not how it works! And Isaiah must call out against all these things with a loud voice. You can't bargain with God. The evil that one does to his neighbors can't be made right again by someone fasting more and praying more. God calls through Isaiah to the people of Israel and He calls through Isaiah also to us. For it has become dark in our world since too little love can be found. And we can consistently observe that people do exactly what the Israelites did before us. They rip the bread from their neighbor's mouth so that they can have a full stomach themselves. And then they still also think that they can make everything right with a little fasting and prayer. In one way or another, this applies to all of us. I'll give you an example: many people have come to us in the church over the years. Some of them received the right to stay in Germany because of their baptism and because of their activities in the church. And some of those who received their right of residency in this way didn't come to church anymore immediately or very soon after having received the right of residency. Of such people you must say: They used God so that they could have a good life here in Germany. But because these people don't come to church anymore, it is becoming more and more difficult to prove the credibility of those who must fight for their right of residency today. Many who file an application for the right of residency are rejected because someone in the government office doesn't believe that they are really Christians. So one can say that the previous ones who received such a right of residency in an unethical manner have ripped the bread out of the mouths of their brothers and sisters. But it gets worse. Because the government recognized this practice, they invited those who received their right of residency in the past through their Christian activities, back to the government offices. So after 3 years, they want to recheck the reasons for fleeing again to see whether the things that occurred 3 years ago still apply. And then it's astonishing that these people who stopped coming to church 3 years ago all at once become very pious again and want to go to church again every day. Isaiah's words affect such people and us all: God doesn't want our heart for a little bit of time. God doesn't want just individual parts of our lives – He also doesn't want just our prayers so that we look good to others, but God wants our entire lives to be a service to God and to our neighbors. This is the true worship that Isaiah talks about here. That means that our hearts should be open to the hungry and the souls of those who are bowed down should be satisfied. In the Old Testament, soul didn't just mean the stomach but the entire being. So it means that we aren't just partially there for our neighbors but dedicate our entire lives to others. To be there for God and our neighbor with our whole heart and all our soul. And that is true fasting. God wants us to be pious through and through. It is quite

simply about limitless love. Limitless love for God and limitless love for our neighbors. And that is true worship and true fasting.

What Isaiah says ends in an open question. Namely the question: How should that be done? God demands limitless love from us. He demands that we give ourselves completely. And how should that be done when this limitless love isn't to be found in us? And how can Isaiah talk at all about such a limitless love when it is nowhere to be seen? On the contrary: The walls in Jerusalem had been destroyed all around. Everything was broken and most of all, the hearts of the people were broken. And what's more, the people devoured and destroyed each other. How can one talk about limitless love when the limits of such a love can be seen everywhere? Isaiah saw the darkness around him and around his people. And yet he also saw a little light burst through. There, where it was dark, it becomes bright again and there where drought was, streams of water should flow. You will call upon God and without hesitation He will say: Here I am. All this should happen because love has free rein. But now I am really amazed and ask myself where Isaiah got the courage to speak about such a limitless love? What Isaiah says makes us, together with the entire Old Testament community, ask: How can this be? We also see destruction all around and in the love within us we can see big cracks. How can one talk about such limitless love when this love is nowhere to be found?

There is an answer to Isaiah's open question. And much more there is also proof of this limitless love. This proof and this answer has a name. Its name is Jesus Christ. It is Jesus alone who was unendingly rich. And He gave up that wealth so that we could become rich. Jesus laid His life on the altar, offering mankind His love. He Himself suffered being forsaken by God so that we could hear the voice of God. He gave us His Spirit so that we Christians can say: "HE LIVES IN ME." Jesus Christ answers this question that is left open in Isaiah. Love from one to another. A heart that gives of itself unconditionally to others. That doesn't come from nothing. There must be a reason. And Jesus Christ is the reason. Even in the darkness, this love of Jesus is the cornerstone of our entire lives. A light shines from Jesus. And we experience God's love and God's nearness. This love doesn't stay within us. Love can't simply remain with one person. It goes out and out and out. It's becoming light, the water flows like a bubbling brook... it isn't a dream. This love is among because He is among us. Amen.