

## **“Matters That Matter”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
August 7, 2022 – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 12:32-40

Your worship is awful! Your sermons are sacrilegious! Your music hurts my ears! I want no more of your puny offerings. I want no more of your hollow communion rituals or your wordy prayers.

If God would offer us this message this morning, how would we feel? Hurt? Discouraged? Offended?

But as we read in our first scripture lesson, that’s the exact hurtful, discouraging, and downright offensive word that God offers through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Judah about their own worship. Isaiah conveys to his people and their leaders this hard message: Their acts of worship are worthless because they are accompanied by deeds of evil, specifically, acts of injustice and oppression against the lowly. Because of these sins, the people and leaders of Judah are compared to the people and leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that were infamous for their wickedness and destroyed because of it. And it should be noted, that the acts of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah for which they were punished, thus making them a symbol for extreme wickedness and divinely delivered destruction, was not their sexual practices, but their acts of greed and injustice. The prophet Ezekiel wrote of the cities that “[they and their] daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49). Isaiah’s word to the leaders of Jerusalem and people of all Judah was for them to turn from this kind of wickedness, the sins of greed and injustice, to avoid their own destruction. Isaiah’s recipe for his people’s salvation is this: “Cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue to the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17). Then, though their sins are as scarlet, they will become like snow, and the people will enjoy the good of the land.

The lesson from Isaiah for the people of Judah back in the day and for the people of Stoneham in this day is that, while our worship matters, what matters more is living in ways that make our society more just, especially for the lowly, or as written in the book of Proverbs: “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3).

Too often, though, in churches here and throughout our nation, we don't promote what matters most, but instead focus on our religious rites and rituals as though they are somehow magical motions and words that can save us and our society. They are not. Our worship *is* a grateful and loving response to God's great grace in our lives, not a vehicle to manipulate God into forgiving us or giving us what we want so that we can then live like jerks, being free of concern for others or our planet. May the goals of our worship here be to offer pure expressions of thanksgiving and dedication to doing God's work in the world!

Last week, we learned from the gospel lesson from Luke that the goal of our lives should not be to gather up stuff in "bigger barns" so that we can snooze through life, living free from concern for others, but to gather and share what we can to promote the good of others. In today's gospel lesson, Jesus continues that message, offering an assortment of sayings that focus on being fully awake, alert, and prepared for the coming day of judgment by storing up treasures, not in big barns or snazzy purses, which are temporary, but in spiritual ways that outlast time itself. Jesus' recipe for building imperishable spiritual riches is this: "Sell your possessions and give alms" (Luke 12:33). Giving to the lowly is the work of God that builds up timeless treasures; the work itself is a treasure that can fill our hearts. Giving -- not getting -- is what really matters. Giving -- not getting -- in our worship is what really matters. Giving -- not getting -- our material resources is what really matters. Giving of our time, talent, and treasure to promote justice, especially for the lowly, is what really matters.

May we focus on the matters that matter when we gather each week for our hour of worship. More importantly, may we do the work that matters throughout the other 167 hours of the week. In so doing, may our hearts be filled with God's abiding love and peace. Amen.