

I'm surprised the bakery even needed a sign. Everyone in town knew where Gable's Bakery was located. It was right there on the corner, right at the light in town.

I grew up in a small town, you see. (Shout-out to any viewers from Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania!) It was a small town, small enough that when you referred to "the light in town," everyone knew exactly what you were talking about. To be fair, by the time I was growing up there, the town boasted at least four or five traffic lights... but the phrase "the light in town" referred to only one of them: the traffic light at the corner of Bridge Street and Tioga Street, smack-dab in the center of town.

That's where Gable's Bakery was located, and that's where the sign for Gable's Bakery was located, too... there on the side of the building along Bridge Street, reminding passersby of the bakery entrance just around the corner. The owners have since retired. The bakery has since closed. But oh, they had the most delicious bread... and the softest, sweetest, most pillowy sugar cookies... forget a dozen, you'd want to buy them by the gross... there at Gable's Bakery, the shop with the sign by the light in town.

There was another sign, though, right above the Gable's sign. Another sign for another business, one located just up the street from the bakery. Another sign advertising the town's Christian book shop. The pairing of those two signs always made me laugh. The sign for Gable's Bakery, advertising delicious breads since 1959. And alongside it, the sign for Paradise Christian Book Shop, bearing the words "Man does not live by bread alone." A sweet, tongue-in-cheek, small-town reminder: Gable's has what you need to feed your belly, but Paradise has what you need to feed your soul.

*Man does not live by bread alone. One does not live by bread alone.* It's something Jesus says in the gospels, quoting the book of Deuteronomy as he's tempted in the wilderness. *One does not live by bread alone.* Jesus (and the Paradise Christian Book

Shop) may be quoting words from the book of Deuteronomy, but they may as well be quoting the book of Isaiah.

It's the scripture that has been our focus throughout this season of Lent. Throughout these forty days, we've been returning to the words from Isaiah 58, words about true fasting (and all that goes with it). Each week, as we've read Isaiah's words, we've reflected on what we need to fast from: things like self-righteousness and selfishness.

But wait... we're not self-righteous and selfish, right? Well... not so fast. In all of this talk about fasting, Isaiah compels us to dig deep, to uncover the self-righteousness and selfishness that lives within us, to re-define what it even means to be "self-righteous" or "selfish." Isaiah compels us to fast from self-righteousness and feast on humility, to fast from selfishness and feast on selflessness. Isaiah's kind of on our case this Lent... but in exactly the way that we need.

Now last week, we reflected on Isaiah's words in verses 6 and 7:

<sup>6</sup> Is not this the fast that I choose: ...  
<sup>7</sup> to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

As we reflected on those words, we realized: Isaiah isn't saying: *make sure the poor have stuff*. Isaiah is saying: *share your stuff*. God, through Isaiah, is saying: *share your stuff... because it's not really "your" stuff. It's not your stuff to hoard. It's your stuff to use, your stuff to share*. What Isaiah is saying -- what God, through Isaiah, is saying -- compels us to see ourselves not as owners, but as stewards. What God is saying, through the

prophet Isaiah, compels us to fast from ownership, and feast on stewardship. Then (Isaiah says) “your light shall break forth like the dawn” (Isaiah 58:8, NRSV).

Then... this weird thing happens. Isaiah repeats himself, like two verses later. In Isaiah 58:10, we read:

<sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.

A little strange, isn't it? Like... *Isaiah, we already went over this 'share your stuff with the hungry and then you'll have light and such' thing. Isaiah, we just went over this.*

As I was planning out this sermon series a few months ago, I noticed that repetition. I thought it was a little strange (*why is Isaiah doubling back and repeating himself?*)... but I just didn't have time to stop and wonder too much about it. I didn't have time to overthink the scripture. But hey, you know what I had this week? I had time to stop and wonder and overthink the scripture! If coronavirus has offered us one thing, it's time to overthink things, amen?

Last week, as we read verses 6 and 7, we found Isaiah talking about some very practical, tangible, physical needs. “Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house” (Isaiah 58:7, NRSV). And while we're at it, in this season of coronavirus: *share your disinfecting wipes with your neighbor and offer your hand sanitizer to the stranger in your midst.* In verse 7, as we noted last week, Isaiah is talking about some very practical, tangible, physical needs.

At first glance, it seems like that's what Isaiah is doing in verse 10, too. “Offer your food to the hungry” (Isaiah 58:10, NRSV). Food for the hungry. Seems like a pretty practical, tangible, physical need being met here, too.

Unless you take a bit of time to dive into the Hebrew. Because in the Hebrew, it says something else altogether.

I'll admit it: I'm a Bible nerd. When the world around me is spinning almost out of control, I throw myself into ancient biblical languages. (My extended family makes fun of me for this.) But why do I do it? Because the world may be spinning, but *shalom* will still be *shalom*, and *shalom* will still mean "wholeness and peace," just like it has for thousands of years. In times like these, ancient things make me feel rooted, anchored. You probably have your own way to cope in this season, one that has nothing to do with ancient biblical languages... but I'm sticking with Hebrew. Now I know you may not be as fascinated with Hebrew translations as I am... but this one is really cool, so bear with me.

Yes, in verse 7, Isaiah is talking about meeting your neighbor's hunger with a very practical, tangible, physical response. Bread. *Lechem*, in the Hebrew. (It's the same word that puts the "lehem" in "Bethlehem," as a matter of fact. Right now, in our city, we're in the "house of bread." That's what "Bethlehem" means.)

But in verse 10, the word that's translated there as "food"? "Offer your food to the hungry"? It's not *lechem*. It's not bread. But it's not the Hebrew word for "food," either, despite what our English translations read. It's... something else altogether. It's *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is... your soul, your appetites, your passion, your inner bundle of energy, your whole being. *Nephesh* is what makes Adam a living being, back in Genesis, when God breathes into him the very breath of life. *Nephesh* is that non-physical, metaphysical part of you that makes you human, that makes you *you*. Offer *that* to the hungry, Isaiah tells us in verse 10.

Back in verse 7, Isaiah urges us readers to offer a practical, tangible, physical response to a practical, tangible, physical hunger. He's talking about the kinds of things

we can drop off and donate, the kinds of things we can buy and sell, the kinds of things that we're currently buying in bulk at the grocery store (if we can find them). He's talking about bread -- and, in this season of coronavirus, I don't think it's reading too much into the text to say he's also talking about meat, medicine, hand sanitizer, and toilet paper. Practical, tangible, physical responses to practical, tangible, physical needs.

But here in verse 10, Isaiah urges us to offer a very different kind of response to a very different kind of hunger. Here, he's not talking about physical responses that will sustain our bodies. Here, he's talking about spiritual, communal responses that will sustain our souls. He's talking about offering the things we can't drop off or donate or buy... and not because they're "out of stock." He's talking about offering our very selves, our whole being. He's talking about a life-giving, soul-sustaining human connection. It's a bit more than "offer your food to the hungry," wouldn't you say?

And Hebrew is the gift that keeps on giving here in Isaiah 58. See, while the words that are rendered in our English translations as "bread" (vs. 7) or "food" (vs. 10) are wildly different in the Hebrew... the words that are rendered as "hunger" are exactly the same. *To the hungry, your bread*, the Hebrew basically reads in verse 7. And *To the hungry, your whole being*, it reads in verse 10. As human creatures, the hunger we feel for soul-sustaining human connection is as real as the hunger we feel for life-sustaining bread.

The problem is: we find ourselves in a season of social distancing. We're limiting our face-to-face human connections in an effort to slow the spread of the virus, to flatten the curve of the pandemic. And hard as it is to live it out, I believe in it. I do. It's a powerful way for us to protect the most vulnerable amongst us, and that feels like the work of the church. That's the intended effect of social distancing.

But there's a side effect of social distancing, too, right? Social distancing makes us feel... distanced. Isolated. Detached. Alienated. And since we crave soul-sustaining human connection as much as we crave bread... social distancing makes us feel hungry. We're starving for social connection. We're starving for spiritual connection. We're starving for shared human experience.

My kiddos are starving for it. While I was writing this sermon, Ellie was interrupting me every ten minutes, asking if she could go to her grandparents' house, asking if her cousins could come over, asking if she could have a play date with her friends. *No, honey...* I said over and over. *We can't do that right now. We're staying home to protect ourselves and other people from the virus.*

Finally, I asked her if she wanted to do a FaceTime call with one of her closest friends. She was delighted. He showed her all of his Minecraft figurines. She showed him her new pogo stick. He talked about playing soccer. She talked about doing gymnastics. They compared notes about their kindergarten teachers. They made each other laugh. They compared eye colors. They talked to each other -- "face-to-face," in a way -- for as long as our cell phone batteries would allow. They needed it. They needed us to offer them that opportunity for human connection as much as they needed us to offer them lunch.

So how can we, as the church, offer that to one another? How can we protect one another while also connecting with one another? I urge you -- Isaiah urges you -- to get creative and find ways to do just that. Try something digital. Skype or Zoom or FaceTime a conversation. Send a "hello" through text or email. Grandparents, record yourselves reading a story to the kiddos you love. Or go old-school. Pick up a phone and make an actual phone call. Write a note and send it through the mail. Kiddos, get those crayons going and mail some original works of art to the grown-ups you love. Whether

it's high-tech or low-tech, find ways to connect with the people who are part of your life. Find ways to share your "whole being" with them, even when you can't be in the same room.

And don't neglect the spiritual connections. I'm so glad you've logged on for worship today. Even if you're not here in this room, you are still worshipping with us, and with everyone else who has logged on, too. Christ isn't limited to this room, right? And neither is his church. So keep finding ways to worship. Share our services and devotionals with the people in your lives. We're working on prayer groups and Bible studies via Zoom -- give it a try, connect that way! If you come across a scripture verse that's particularly life-giving to you, share it with someone else -- chances are it can be life-giving for them, too. Spend time praying for the people you love -- and let them know you're doing it. Pray *with* them, in whatever ways you can connect. Light a candle at the same time, pray at the same. Find ways to share your soul with their souls, even when you can't be in the same sanctuary.

In an op-ed piece written this week, Rabbi Yosef Kanfesky of Los Angeles argues that even while we *practice* social distancing, "distancing" shouldn't be our mindset. He writes:

Every hand that we don't shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.<sup>1</sup>

As human creatures, the hunger we feel for soul-sustaining human connection is as real as the hunger we feel for life-sustaining bread. And that shouldn't be a surprise to us, right? We're people who follow and worship and serve the One who said, "I am the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://forward.com/opinion/441490/coronavirus-is-a-test-for-the-government-but-its-a-test-for-us-too/>

bread of life” (John 6:35, NRSV). So to the hungry, offer your bread. Sustain one another with practical, tangible, physical gifts. But don’t neglect the other kind of “hunger,” too. One does not live by bread alone, or so I hear. So to the hungry, offer your whole being, your soul, your very self. You are Christian people, you are the church, you are the very hands and feet and heart and voice of the Bread of Life. People are hungry, friends. Give them your bread. Give them your whole being. Give them the Bread of Life.

*Prayer*