

**Your Healing will spring forth**  
**Isaiah 58:1-12**  
**Matt. 5:13-20**  
**February 9 2014**

Does anyone here remember how to do long division, you know, elementary school math. Let's take an easy one. 39 divided by 3 or 3 goes into 39 how many times?

Now, it's fairly easy to conceptualize this one. Just by thinking about it we could say that 3 goes into 39, 13 times, but sometimes the teacher wants you to demonstrate how you got the answer. She/he might want you to "show your work." (*demonstrate the steps of long division with this simple problem*).

Now the same principles apply even if the question becomes more difficult.

Let's say the question is 462 divided by 3, you just go through the same steps.

*(Demonstrate the answer through long division for this one).*

That's how I learned long division. Does it still work that way? Yes?  
Great.

When I preach, I presume that you realize there's a fair bit of preparatory work that goes into it and since that is in fact true, I am grateful for your trust.

This morning, I have decided it's important to show my work not because I think you don't trust me, but because sometimes it matters to know how we get from "a to b" so that if a more difficult question arises we might have some idea what to do then.

Right now, we as a congregation are on the verge of a difficult question. What is the next most faithful step with our proposed building project and our vision for what it can be? Our current proposal includes a plan that incorporates this building with the 6 Lark property just north of us, that respects the hopes of the people who bought that house so many years ago, and addresses the needs and desires of this community for creative use of our space as expressed in a 2008 visioning process and re-expressed in and through three space task forces since then. Our current visioning task force proposes that it could also be transitional housing for victims/survivors of human trafficking.

Now for just a moment, I'm going to switch metaphors. I'm going to switch from math to weaving. Together we in this congregation are weaving a cloth that represents our life together. The number of coloured threads in this cloth we are weaving is equal to the number of people here, the number of people who call TUMC their church home. Each of us holds a thread so it's a really a complex pattern we're weaving together. This morning, by showing you my work, I'm going to show you what I've been doing with the thread I've been holding and invite you to think about what part the thread in your hands needs to play in our next step.

Our primary texts for this morning are Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 5:13-20. Maybe you've already noticed what I noticed when I read these texts. Matthew 5:13-20 is the Salt and Light text we used all summer when we were asking ourselves questions about vision for our congregation – who are we and who are we called to be as Salt and Light. I won't be spending as much time with this text because we had such a thorough treatment of it in the summer. Isaiah 58 is part of the Servant songs of Isaiah and right in the middle of today's text in verse 6ff.

Is not this the fast that I choose;  
 to loose the bonds of injustice,  
 to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
 to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

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 them  
 and not to hide yourself from you own kin?

These texts are so clearly related to our present question *if I wanted to proof text in order to make certain points about what we as a congregation should do next these are precisely the texts I should have chosen*. And so this is one of the places I need to show my work. Several weeks ago, worship committee decided that between Christmas and Lent, we should stay in the season of Epiphany where we contemplate

how the mystery of God dwelling among us is revealed through the teaching, healing and transfiguration of Jesus. In order to follow our theme, we decided, I was part of the decision, that we will encourage preachers to use the lectionary texts for the season. Lectionary texts are scriptures set out by an ecumenical body of the Christian church that walks the church through the important elements of the Biblical narrative over a three-year cycle and throughout the church year. The purpose of the lectionary is to help us avoid our favourite texts, and even though the entire bible is not represented by the lectionary, it's a good start. Now, when leadership here at TUMC also wanted February to be an opportunity to deepen our exploration of our proposed vision, I thought, oh dear, how do we do that and stay true to the theme proposed weeks ago by our worship committee. In fact, I was actually frustrated with what I now experienced as the imposition of texts on our preaching, an imposition I was part of remember, when now I wanted more freedom.

And here we are. These are the texts that by virtue of a prior decision came up for me this week; texts that speak directly to the vision proposal.

The thread that I'm holding tells me that this is the work of the Spirit thinly disguised as a coincidence.

And so I chose to dive in and explore the texts as I always do and I'll continue now to show you my work.

I looked at the historical critical background of the poetry here in what scholars call third Isaiah. Proposed date for its writing is around 465 BCE, which means it was a word spoken to those refugees who had returned to Jerusalem from their time of capture in Babylon. Around 465 BCE, Nehemiah is governor of Israel and the Persian ruler Artaxerxes had just come to power. There has been worship in a rebuilt temple of sorts for about half a century and according to the first few verses of Isaiah 58, this worship was not satisfying to God, the Eternal One of Israel, or to the people who were worshiping. Their worship consisted of fasting, making inquiries of God and praying for justice.

In literary terms the text appears to be set up as a type of theatrical scene with a back and forth conversation between several voices. Some voices are from God's heavenly court and the responding voices could be either Judah or the Persian Emperor. God and the voices from the heavenly court address "you" in plural form in the first four verses and so we interpret that to be addressed to all of Judah. After verse four, in verses 5-14 the address is to "you" in the masculine singular – to a human being – in Hebrew *adam*, and so could mean any one of the Judean/Israelite worshippers or the emperor himself.

And now turning to the content of that address: In the first four verses, God asks the heavenly court to announce to the people their sin and rebellion even though, as it says, "they delight to seek me and to know my ways."

Judean worshippers respond with, “why do we fast and you do not see, why do we humble ourselves and you do not hear?”

The heavenly court then points out to the Judean worshippers that they are fasting with pleasure and suppressing their pain. And they fast even while there is strife and contention among them. Verse five where God now addresses the individual worshipper, asks, “is this the fast I choose, where you humble yourself like a wilting plant wearing sack cloth and ashes? Is this a day acceptable to the Eternal One?”

This is a verse that we are very familiar with as it finds echoes in Micah’s question, what does the Lord require of you? and in Zechariah 7:1-10 in an address to King Darius centuries earlier than Third Isaiah, where God demanded that instead of fasting and lamenting the people should render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. ...

Each in their own context, these prophets were speaking to the Israelites, the Judeans and Persians and before the Persians to the Assyrians. In Matthew, in our text for today at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to his disciples that he has not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. So there is a link between the admonition of the prophets and Jesus’ own instructions in this Sermon on the Mount. If we had time to examine this more closely we would see that righteousness or right actions for Jesus both parallels and expands on these prophetic themes.

As Mennonites, we are very familiar with these texts by the prophets and by Matthew. These texts make up a vast portion of our sung theology. We may even have words by Menno Simons hanging on a plaque somewhere in our houses, where he draws on these verses when he says, "For true evangelical faith....cannot lie dormant; but manifest itself in all righteousness and works of love; it...clothes the naked; feeds the hungry; consoles the afflicted; shelters the miserable; aids and consoles all the oppressed; returns good for evil; serves those that injure it; prays for those that persecute it." This is a quote from his 1539, *Why I do not Cease Teaching and Writing*.

And why do I not cease preaching if everything I've just shared is a word that we could already say or at least sing by heart?

Because its about more than just knowing the words or even the right things to do.

In doing those right things we will find our own healing and wellbeing. The announcement to each individual Judean worshipper is that if they do find ways to loose the bonds of injustice in the many and varied ways there is to do that....

then their light shall break forth like the dawn and *their healing shall spring up quickly*.

Free others and you yourselves will be healed and your prayers will be heard. Free another and you free yourselves, attend to the healing of another and you attend to the healing of yourselves.

So, this morning I haven't told you anything that you did not know.  
I have only shown you my work.  
Take a close look at a Scriptural text,  
wonder about and or do research about its original context  
if it's an Old Testament text ask how might it connect with the words  
and work of Jesus  
ask where it fits within our own denominational and church history  
and then wonder how it applies to us  
These are basic steps of long division that can help us whether the  
question is straightforward or more complex.  
Knowing in broad strokes that we should do these things does not help  
us yet to discern exactly what we are called to do now. This is where the  
metaphor breaks down.

There is one more step, a vital step that does not always conform to  
mathematical principles.  
Seek a Word from God or seek to discern the work of the Spirit in our  
midst.

This is where the threads come in.  
Each of us is holding a thread and the role of discernment in a  
community is discovering just how your thread, the one you are holding  
fits with all the others.  
And even figuring that out is unique for each one of us because we hear  
God's word and the work of the Spirit in our lives in unique ways.  
Some of us experience God viscerally,



some of us dream about what we should do,  
some of us need to make lists of pros and cons and discern where God  
might be in that list  
some of us draw on a lifetime of wisdom and experience and need to ask,  
where has God been at work in my life before that is important now for  
this question?  
Some of us allow the words of Scripture to impress themselves on our  
minds and heart and spirits and speak what we've heard to each other.

All of that is discernment,

But what matters most is to recognize that the thread that you hold does  
not just represent you, but as a follower of Christ, as a slave to Christ  
where in fact true freedom lies as Doug reminded us last Sunday the  
thread that you hold also represents the life of Christ in you. And when  
you hold your thread and decide how you are going to contribute with  
your thread, you are discerning the work of Christ in and through you.  
That thread you hold as part of this process is not a lifeless thing.

It is alive and vital.

And it is the desire of God through Christ that together we will weave  
something strong and bright and freeing and healing for us all.

Amen.

