"Fast and Free"

Matthew 19:16-26; Isaiah 58:6-12 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 13, 2026
Disciples Mission Week Sunday

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be held fast in your heart and free to live out your love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I want to start with a word about the graphic on the screen right now. This textile art was created by Rev. Mollie Donihe, Minister of Creative Spirituality at Ridglea Christian Church in Fort Worth, Texas, specifically for us and other congregations to use as part of Disciples Missions Week this week. This past week, Disciples Home Missions – one of our general ministries based in Indianapolis – invited Disciples from across the church to focus on mission together. They offered daily webinars – covering food insecurity, healthcare equity, housing insecurity, and disability equity. These sessions were recorded so you can go back and watch them, if you missed them live, like I did. They included Disciples leaders and congregations that are doing outstanding work on each of those issues.

The Isaiah passage we just heard was chosen as the theme scripture of Disciples Mission Week, and Rev. Mollie's artwork is an interpretation of those verses. You can see the broken chains, and the light breaking forth, and the healing springing forth in the form of that purple flower. There's even a bee symbolizing how the blessing will be spread farther, as it carries the pollen it collected away to other places.

The other part of Disciples Mission Week – the one that we actually managed to connect with – is that they asked Disciples congregations to engage in a day of service yesterday. It was well timed for us, since the end of Disciples Mission Week fell on the second Saturday of the month, when we were holding Welcome Saturday anyway. And so it is that we are invited to reflect on Welcome Saturday, in the light of Isaiah 58. And this morning, I also want to reflect on Isaiah 58, in light of the passage from read from Matthew 19.

That poor young rich man! He was so close to getting it! He was pretty certain he'd done everything right. No murdering, no adultery, honoring his father and mother. He seemed pretty sure he'd even managed to never steal or lie and to love his neighbor as himself. But that final fast Jesus suggested was a bridge too far. One thing that's interesting to me is that this young man seems to think that he can somehow "earn" his salvation, if he just follows the rules hard enough, and in one reading of Isaiah 58, you could see how he got there. The verses from the prophet keep saying 'if you do this and this, and make you never do that or that, God will be with you and keep you safe.' And yet, there are hints of something bigger than following the rules in both of these passages.

Did you notice how Jesus' teaching Matthew, despite how the young man's question tries to make faith about following rules, starts and ends with God's goodness and power. "There is only One who is good," Jesus said, before he got into

the discussion of keeping the commandments. And by the end of his de-brief with the disciples about the fate of the young rich man and rich men in general, he pointed out again, that salvation doesn't come because of what we do, but because God makes it possible.

So what if we were use Jesus' teaching about God being the author of our salvation and apply it to the prophetic exhortation in Isaiah 58? When we do that, we start to see some additional hints that help us to realize that, yes, salvation is more complicated and nuanced than being rewarded for being good. We can start to see how the prophet, rather than giving us a list of do's and don't's, is inviting us to live in alignment with God.

When we think about Welcome Saturday in the light of Isaiah 58, the first connection we might notice is the part about sharing our bread with the hungry and inviting the homeless poor into our house. But I think the more important phrase comes at the end of that sentence, when we are urged "not to hide yourself from your own kin". The "fast" that Isaiah is encouraging here is about actual actions, but it's also about how those actions transform the way we understand the world. If we want to live in alignment with God, we need to let our ministries convince us that the people we are serving are, in fact, our family – our sisters and brothers and siblings.

Without having watched them yet, I can guess with confidence that the webinars offered by DHM this week were designed to help people dream big – to

imagine how we might address root causes and provide better, longer-term solutions to problems, rather than what are sometimes disparagingly called "band-aids." I will say I think the church is finally moving away from a moment when people tried to draw clear lines and often judgments between what was truly justice-work and what was "merely" charity. We are coming to understand better that it's all connected.

Because Christianity is an incarnational faith, I believe with my whole heart that every single body we clothe or feed matters. Will they be hungry again tomorrow? Obviously so. But the meal that was shared was holy. More importantly, when we have committed ourselves to the long-term – that is, once we've fed someone, even just once a month, for a decade, it does become clear that these folks are family; our eyes are opened to the kinship we share.

Ministries like Welcome Saturday are important because they result in people being less hungry and less lonely. But they are also important because they keep us from seeing homelessness and food insecurity as mere "issues," and instead ensure that those "issues" will always have names and faces attached to them. This is the practice that an incarnational faith invites us to engage in, so that we can align our hearts and minds and lives more faithfully with God. The "fast" that we're invited into is giving up the idea that we are separate from other people, somehow un-responsible for one another. It's not just what we do, but what that doing does to us.

For all of his careful rule-following, that rich young man wasn't ready for the fast that would truly change him. I think it's important to recognize that we don't actually know how his story ended. Sometimes a scary challenge takes some getting used to. Perhaps he walked away grieving because he really liked having all those possessions, yet he knew they were a burden holding him back from faithfulness. Why would he have asked the question in the first place, if he was so clear already that he was following all the rules? He had to have had some sense that something was missing. It wouldn't surprise me if he even knew what it was. He'd heard the words of Isaiah before. He knew that he didn't see the homeless poor as his kin, because he allowed his possessions to build a barrier between them and himself. If he were to find himself in this artwork before us, I wonder if he might have felt like the ground, being broken open, asked to release its treasures, so that something new and life-giving could come forth. But do you think he could imagine that some day he might be more like the bee, ready to carry those blessings out to anyone that needed them?

Where do we find ourselves in this picture? Are we being broken open? Are we basking in the light? Are we the chain, recovering from having our original purpose smashed, but considering how we might become useful in a different way? There are many ways for Disciples to engage in mission; some are hands-on, some are more abstract and policy-oriented. But when we keep God's love for all humanity in the center of whatever we do, we will know that we're following Jesus. H. and Amen.