

Not a Vending Machine God

“But we have the mind of Christ” 1 Corinthians 2:16b.

When I first started here at Emmanuel in 2016, I had the opportunity to live in the West Central neighborhood for a couple years at the Sheridan Court Apartments. That apartment complex had many good things going for it. One good thing, was that I had access to laundry machines right there on the property because not every complex has one on their own property. Well, when laundry day would come, or if I’m being more honest when I was about to run out of clothes and had no choice but to do some laundry, I would haul everything to the laundry room and get things started.

Aside from washers and dryers, this laundry room also had an arcade game and vending machines to help past the time. With phones nowadays, the arcade game wasn’t too much of a temptation, but the vending machines with snacks and drinks, that was much harder to pass up. I often found myself spending a little more money for a snack and drink on top of the money I was already spending on laundry.

The frustrating part though was that sometimes with these vending machines things didn’t go as expected. These were “old school” vending machines, and what I mean by that is that you still had to use coins and cash not a credit card. A time or two, the machines just took my money without me receiving anything in return even after I selected. Another time, the drink I chose was no longer in stock. And the most frustrating experiences of all, were that time or two when I selected and the mechanism that pushed the snack out moved but didn’t get the snack all the way out so that I couldn’t get what I wanted. That was infuriating and I certainly wanted to force that machine to give me what I wanted.

Now I don’t simply share this story with you because it’s an experience that has stuck with me and I can’t get over it – no, there’s actually a point. The way things didn’t work so well with those vending machines reflects how the people of Israel’s relationship often went with God. The nation of Israel often found their relationship with God useful when they had a need. For them, God’s usefulness was simply in how He could benefit them and so the depth of their relationship with God went as far as their most current need or crisis. When those needs or crises arose, they’d do some religious actions expecting those deeds to pressure God into doing what they expected or wanted.

It’s this kind of relationship with God that Isaiah rebuked Israel for in our first reading this weekend. Listen again to the beginning of this reading, **“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it?”** (*Isaiah 58:3*). Isaiah captures two questions on the hearts and lips of the people of Israel that expose their vending-machine-like relationship with God. They thought they had entered the proper work that God desired and so they, in turn, expected God to respond on demand.

But their fasting wasn’t what God desired. In fact, through Isaiah, God tells them that their kind of fasting wouldn’t turn heaven’s ear toward them. Further, Isaiah exposes that Israel’s vending-machine-like relationship with God had led to a similar type of relationship with each other. The Lord desired a fast that led to mercy, grace and compassion – removing burdens, freeing from wickedness and ending oppression. However, Israel’s fasting resulted in the exact opposite – quarreling and fighting among each other selfishly seeking personal benefits while ignoring another’s need. Israel’s vending-machine-like relationships with God and each other limited them to seeing God’s usefulness and their fellow people’s usefulness solely by how they might benefit from them.

Sadly, albeit not too surprising though, today’s nations sound eerily similar to Israel. Furthermore, today’s people, yes you and me, sound eerily similar to the people of Israel as well. We, like sinful Israel in Isaiah’s day, also struggle with a very transactional, vending-machine-like, relationship with God that extends into our relationships with each other. We often only find our relationships with God or each other useful if we get some benefit out of it. And so, we invest our religious work, our good deed for the day, expecting these things to get a response. Maybe for some of us it’s our regular, consistent worship attendance, or that extra-mile work of attending a Bible study, or perhaps it’s with prayer, or our offering, or some deed we did for a neighbor, we have done all of these really good things expecting at times that these

pious actions should pressure God into responding our way. But all our misplaced expectations reveal is that our faith isn't really in God, but in our own works which only appear to be devout on the surface.

Throughout our lives, we all fall into this trap. I know I have struggled with this and still do and one of the clearest examples that comes to mind was when I was in seminary. In preparation for Lent, we were offered the opportunity to go through individual confession and absolution. I decided to go. Among the things that I shared with the pastor was that I felt like studying to be a pastor might bring me closer to God. While I didn't think too much of this statement compared to the other things that I had shared, this astute pastor recognized this trap of treating God like a vending machine and rebuked it. I was on a dangerous path to turning the role of a pastor into a work that I thought might exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes. So, He exposed my narrow focus on my work and pointed me back to God's work, reminding me that God had already come close to me by baptizing me into Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The work of making sure that God was close by was already accomplished and Jesus had done it for me with the result that I might now be useful to Him in His kingdom.

Once again in this moment, our Lord comes to rebuke this sinful trap in our lives. He is not a vending machine that responds to our money or the right combination of hollow, religious actions. He responds to His love for us that is undeserved and unearned. God isn't useful to us because we can pressure Him into granting us the benefits we want. He is useful to us because He loves us even though as sinners, we are truly of no benefit to Him. Our God doesn't see us as vending machines like we so often see Him. For Jesus came and actually lived a life in the flesh that was useful to make up for our uselessness. He fulfilled the Law completely because our works fall short. He died in our place because we couldn't ever pay back sin's wages. And He rose so that His righteousness, His light, might be reflected into our lives and our sins forgiven and removed so that we might live this side of heaven with the very real hope of heaven someday.

Because of Jesus, we, who were useless are now useful. We are the salt of the earth and light of the world. Not because of what we did or didn't do, but because of what Jesus said and did in our place. Just like with that original crowd who listened to Jesus' sermon on the mount, we are called salt and light, we are called useful in God's kingdom, well before we've even acted. Because Jesus said so and lived, died and rose to confirm that it is so we are forgiven, restored and useful to Him in His kingdom.

And now through the preaching of Christ crucified and risen, through the gifts of baptism and communion, we are connected to Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil and have the gift of the Holy Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit who guides and directs our faith not to rest on our works or any other wisdom of men, but on the power of God most clearly demonstrated through the cross and empty tomb. This drastically changes our relationship with God. Our minds and hearts have been changed to understand that God isn't merely our heavenly vending machine, He is our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

By the Spirit's work, we have the mind of Christ and this new mindset reveals to us that we are useful in God's kingdom because of His work and not our own. The impact of this new mindset is freeing. No longer do we have to believe Satan's lies that we have no purpose in God's kingdom because of our sinful work. Jesus has covered and forgiven our sinfulness with His work so that we might have a very real purpose as He shines His work through us. No longer do we have to work endlessly and fruitlessly seeking fulfillment in our own glory, but rather we can find satisfaction and fulfillment in working for God's glory. No longer do we have to shallowly view people only by what they can or can't do for us, instead we graciously and compassionately view others through what God has done for them upon the cross and His desire to continue to make Himself known in every life in this world. With the mind of Christ, we boldly go forth as useful members of God's kingdom, with light breaking forth like the dawn and righteousness going before us and with the glory of the Lord as our rear guard. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan