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"Which Fast Do You Choose?"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On February 22nd, 2023, from Isaiah 58:1-12

I want to tell you about my trip to Las Vegas, and I thought the best time for me to talk about "Sin City" is Ash Wednesday. This is the day we put all our cards on the table, tell the whole truth, get real about our humanity, face our mortality, confess our sins, and ask God for forgiveness. I know "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," but tonight is the night when Vegas comes to church. When my wife and I were in Vegas, we were fortunate enough to score tickets to see the one and only John Legend. It was one of the best shows I've ever seen. He had us singing, dancing, laughing, and crying. He was incredible. At the end of the night, he closed the show with his Grammy award-winning song that everyone knows the lyrics to. As he beautifully serenaded the audience, we sang the words of the chorus back to him in one-voice...you know how it goes: "Half of me loves half of you. Half your curves and half your edges. Half your perfect imperfections. Give your half to me. I'll give my half to you. You're my in-between and middle, I'm not losing, I'm not winning. Cause I give you half of me. And you give me half of you."

Wait, that's not the way it goes? Can you imagine if those were the lyrics? "Half of me loves half of you." It's not much of a love song when you substitute the word "half" for "all." No one wants a half-hearted love. No one wants to be loved for half of who they are. No one wants half of their lover's affection. No one wants a half-hearted, half-time, half-way, half-on, half-in, or half-baked love. There's another term that starts with "half" I'm not going to say on Ash Wednesday, but I know you're thinking about it. No one wants a half-hearted love! We want the whole shebang—the whole kit and caboodle—the whole ball of wax—the whole hog—the whole nine yards—the whole shooting match—the whole shtick—whole deal. We want the full measure, the full Monty, the full-throated love. We want the works. No one wants a half-hearted kind of love. We want a whole-hearted love and a whole-hearted life, but then why do we settle so often for half the Bible, half the truth, half the gospel, and half the faith? I see it all the time. Christians are settling for just a part of the story, a fragment of the gospel, a segment of the faith, and fraction of what it means to follow Jesus.



I know you saw those commercials about Jesus at the Super Bowl. The “He Gets Us” ads claim that are targeting skeptics, seekers, and lapsed Christians by reintroducing them to the “authentic Jesus from the Bible.” I admit it is startling to see a relatable depiction of Jesus who understands what we are going through today, and at first the ads seem progressive compared to the Christian fascists we usually hear on the news. But when we look more closely at the list of individuals and corporations funding this billion dollar campaign, it turns out they’re the same people funding Christian Nationalism, anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ legislation around the country. What “He Gets Us” gets wrong is that Jesus would never be support spending a billion dollars on advertising. Jesus would have asked, “How many people can we feed? How many people can we house? How much medical debt can we buy for a billion dollars?”

The premise of the campaign is riddled with errors. Jesus’ ministry and message wasn’t simply about “getting us” or understanding our lives, relating to our struggles, or even offering a word of grace and love to a divided world filled with hate. “He Gets Us” only offers us part of the story. They’re selling the world a half-truth and a half-gospel that is only half our faith. Yet, I’ve watched to many people buy into it as if an ad campaign has the power to save us from hatred and division. Why would we settle for half the gospel or half of Jesus? When we sing “Give me Jesus,” we don’t insert the word “half” in the chorus. Can you imagine singing “Give me half of Jesus”? Yet that’s exactly what a lot of us are doing without even realizing it when we settle for only the part of the story that is filled with grace, peace, love, and healing.

Have you heard about this “revival” happening at Asbury University in Winfield Kentucky that has now spread all over the US and abroad. They’re calling it the “Outpouring” and you can watch video on Asbury’s website. The Outpouring started during at the end of a regularly scheduled worship service when some students simply did not go home and kept praying and singing. Since then, students have been skipping class to pray and sing for over two weeks. Thousands of people from all over the country have been streaming into the little town of Winfield to participate, and sister revivals have been breaking out across the country. I tuned in to the livestream to see what it was all about, and the service is really something to behold. There’s very little speaking and almost no preaching. It is just non-stop praise music with everybody singing and swaying, and people down front praying for those who feel touched by the Spirit.



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It is impossible to watch the Outpouring and doubt the sincerity of the people. I'm not cynical enough to imagine it's not real. There is clearly something powerful going on. But if all there is at the Outpouring is singing and praying, then it's only half the gospel and half the faith. Over, and over again, throughout the Bible, we hear a clear and resounding message from God through the prophets that worship without justice is deficient, devoid, and bankrupt. The gospel writers rarely show Jesus worshipping, and when he did he said proclaimed things like, "the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free" or turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple and drove out those who were selling sacrifices. You will never find Jesus, Paul or any of the other apostles hanging in the synagogue singing and praying for hours on end. They were always preaching good news, feeding the hungry, serving the poor, or healing the sick.

The prophets in the Hebrew Bible do not even use the word "worship" if they believe the ritual activities of the people of God are divorced from the practice justice. They might call it "festivals and assemblies, offerings and sacrifices, new moons and sabbaths," but never worship, because worship without justice is not worship at all. It is half-hearted, half-true, and only half the faith. It might be a great musical experience, a fantastic performance, or wonderful entertainment, but it is not worship. I'm not opposed to revivals. Lord knows we need a revival in this country—but we don't need another half-hearted one. We've had plenty of half-hearted revivals and "Great Awakenings" that ignored patriarchy, slavery, lynching, segregation, and mass incarceration. We do not need another revival of half-truths and half-gospels. What we need is a revival that promotes the fullness of the gospel and the fullness of our faith.

We all know the words to Micah 6:8, but do you remember how it starts? "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" God is not looking for a thousand rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, two-weeks of prayer services, or twenty thousand praise songs! We aren't called to give our firstborn for our transgressions like this is some kind of Rumpelstiltskin nightmare. The Lord requires only three things from us: justice, mercy, and humility—and they're all things we are called to give to others.



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There's a song they keep singing at the Asbury revival that has the lyrics, "We want more of you God. We want more of you." As I heard them sing, I kept thinking, "Do you? Do you really want more of God? Do you want more of the God of Micah or the god of Jesus who said, "Go and learn what this means I desire mercy not sacrifice, a reckoning with God rather than burnt offerings." Do we want more of the God of Amos who said, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Do we want more of the God of Isaiah who said, "When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation. I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Do we really want more of the God of the Bible or the one we've made up in our minds?

Over, and over again, we find a clear and resounding message in the Bible that worship without justice is deficient, devoid, and bankrupt. There is no such thing as worship without justice, because without justice our prayer and our praise is half-hearted, half-true, half the gospel, half the faith, and only half of the story. Why would we settle for only half of what God requires of us? The season of Lent is not the time for half-measures, half-truths, half-hearted efforts, half-baked versions of the gospel, or for following Jesus half-way. Lent is time for earnest reflection and serious endeavors to love with our whole bodies and our whole selves, to love God with all our hearts, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Lent is the time for renewed commitment to follow Jesus all the way—not halfway—but all the way to the cross and beyond—to take up our cross and follow him in wholehearted in ways that we have never imagined before.



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Every year when Ash Wednesday comes around it's like New Year's Eve all over again and we start making resolutions. I don't know about you, but every year I think, "Maybe I should exercise more, maybe I should eat healthier, maybe I should cut out sweets, or stop eating meat, or maybe I should stop drinking. Maybe I should meditate more, or read a new devotional every morning, or start journaling again. Maybe I should get a Peloton, the Calm app on my phone, or subscribe to a meal delivery service. I used to give up something or fast from something every single year.

I used to give something up every year for Lent and then one year I stumbled into an Ash Wednesday service at a Catholic Church in Alexandria. I know preaching is not the sacrament in the Catholic Church like it is in the Baptist Church, so I wasn't expecting anything special from the sermon. I was there for the ashes. But the priest gave a homily I'll never forget. It was one sentence long. I'm not kidding. He said, "Jesus was stripped, beaten, tortured, mocked, and crucified on a cross for you and you're giving up chocolate for Lent. Really?" And then he sat down. It was one of the best sermons I've ever heard in my life. He reminded me that fasting is not about giving things up. It's not about sacrifice for sacrifice's sake—or suffering just to say we suffered. The practice of fasting, which pre-dates Jesus, was always about sharing what we have with others. It was about the generosity, sharing, the redistribution of wealth, and economic justice.

When we fast, we are not supposed to give something up for ourselves to get in shape, lose weight, or even to focus more our relationship with God, and be more holy. We are supposed to give up something for the sake of another. There's nothing wrong with giving up sweets, meats, coffee, or chocolate, but it only becomes a "true fast" when we calculate what we would have spent on those creature comforts and give that money to someone suffering from oppression or engaged in the struggle for justice. If you give up some kind of food, then give money to someone trying to end hunger. If you give up time, give to an organization changing the lives of the poor and marginalized. The sacrifices we make in the season of Lent are supposed to have a social impact—and in this economy where time is money and money is everything, any sacrifice we make will likely involve sharing our financial resources. Maybe instead of giving something up for Lent we need to give in to something—to give in to the fullness of our faith by giving in to justice.



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Our scripture from Isaiah 58 is so clear it needs no interpretation. The people of Israel were trying to worship God without seeking justice. They were fasting to serve their own interests instead of others, they were fasting while fighting with their neighbors, they were fasting while oppressing their workers. And the crazy thing is they had the audacity to ask God 'Why don't you do not see our fast? Why don't you notice?' And God responded, "You call this a fast? All these performative things you are doing—this is not a fast and certainly not the fast I choose. The fast I choose is to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; and to cover the naked."

I don't want to fast for myself anymore. I don't want to for my own interests or edification. I want to fast for my neighbor, for the future generations, for the liberation of the oppressed. I want to fast for everyone who is suffering, for everyone who is hurting, for those facing premature death, and for the crucified peoples of our world today. I am trying to choose this fast because I believe that if we really want to bring an end to hatred and heal our divisions or save the soul of the next generation then God has already told us what to do. Isaiah said, if we choose the fast God has chosen, the promise is we will be guided continually, God will satisfy all our needs in the parched places, and make our bones strong, and allow us to be like a watered garden, a spring of water, whose waters never fail. The promise is that God will rebuild our world from the ruins and raise up a foundation of many generations, and they will be called repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets we live in. Now that's a promise. Don't you want those things? Do we want to rebuild community, God says, then do justice. Do we want to save future generations, God says, then let the oppressed go free. Do we want to restore the streets we live in, God says, then feed the hungry, shelter the houseless, and cloth the naked, which is exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 25.

The season of Lent is no time for half-measures, half-truths, half-hearted efforts, half-baked versions of the gospel, or for following Jesus half-way. Lent is time for earnest reflection and serious endeavors to love with our whole bodies and our whole selves, to love God with all our hearts, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Lent is the time for renewed commitment to follow Jesus all the way—not half-way—but all the way to the cross and beyond—to take up our cross and follow him in wholehearted in ways that we have never imagined before. I don't know about you, but I don't want a half-hearted love and I don't think God wants half our hearts either. I think God wants all of us.



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God wants the whole shebang—the whole kit and caboodle—the whole ball of wax—the whole hog—the whole nine yards—the whole shooting match—the whole shtick—whole deal. God wants us to receive whole-truth, the whole-gospel, the whole-faith, the whole story, and for us to go the whole way. So, the question of Ash Wednesday is, which fast will we choose this Lenten season? Will we choose the half-hearted fast of our own making? Or will we choose the fast God said has the power to heal the world? Amen.