

Sunday, November 10, 2024
Rev. Jessica Paulsen
FPC, Corning
Acts 16:11-15
Isaiah 58:1-12

We Repair the Breach

This Sunday we come back to our sermon series about “Loving Your Neighbor in an Election Season.” And you might be thinking, but the election is over, and yes, it is. But when I was planning this series and looking at the dates, knowing I’d be gone the 27th and we’d celebrate All Saints’ Day on November 3rd, it seemed to be a good idea to have part of the series before the election, and part of it after. Because, as we know, the results of an election and their ramifications are not confined to election day.

So, in October, we looked at how we love our neighbor. We talked of how unity doesn’t mean being the same. I introduced our art project for the series, where we can literally see how even with all our differences, we overlap and can find unity in community. Then we looked at how we are to choose non-violence. We saw how Jesus condemned violence, even as he was being arrested. And we are to do the same, even if it puts our lives at risk. We love and we choose non-violence.

Now, today, we have this passage from Isaiah that ends with this beautiful phrase, “you shall be called repairer of the breach” and that phrase guides our focus today, “We Repair the Breach.” But how does the prophet get to this beautiful phrase? What brings it about—that the people are called repairer of the breach?

It starts at the very beginning of the chapter where the prophet says, “Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins...” but then the prophet immediately goes on to talk about how day after day the people seek God. So, what’s the rebellion? What’s the sin?

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We get a hint in verse two when we read the full verse, “Yet day after day they seek God...as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God.”

Okay...so the people are worshipping God, praying and seeking God, but somehow, even as they do that, they have forsaken the ordinance of God. Verse 3-5 give us more details. The people fast, but they do it privately and for their own interests. They fast, but then they go out and quarrel and fight and destroy others. They choose to fast and still they don't see others around them who are hungry not by choice, but by circumstance.

Verse five pronounces judgment on those actions as the prophet asks if choosing to fast in this way, choosing to draw attention to their performance of humility. Isaiah says, “Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?” And the answer is no. What the people have been doing is not acceptable to God, because they have been going through the motions for their own interests. They've been fasting to make themselves and their reputation look good. They want to be able to say, “Hey...look what I did? Aren't I so great and good and following God?” So, they have forsaken the ordinance of God.

But what is that ordinance? Verses six and seven have that answer. The ordinance is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free. It is to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house, and to cover those you see naked. If we were going to sum all of those up, we'd say the ordinance is to see the pain of those around us and work to heal it. To love our neighbor and repair the divisions between us. Then, the prophet says, when you do that, then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly. You shall call on the Lord and the Lord will answer. Isaiah goes on to make things even clearer. If you remove the yoke from among you, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise

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in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday. Then the Lord will guide you and satisfy your needs. Then you shall be called repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live.

But before the people can be called repairer of the breach, they must first stop doing things to be seen and noticed. They must stop fasting only to make themselves and their reputations look good. They must open their eyes to the people around them, caring for those who are hungry, oppressed, and suffering as they have been called to do. Luke Powery makes this calling very clear when he writes:

For Isaiah, it is clear that fasting, worship, is service, the church doing the mission of God in the world. If Christian worship services become severed from service in the world, then we lose liturgical integrity because our creeds do not match our deeds. God's fast challenges believers to see worship as ethics, fasting as action. Worship as a verb. If there is any abstention in this form of fasting, it is the abstaining from indifference and inactivity and egotism, because right worship is righteous living committed to others, especially the least of these. In his sermon "Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?"...

This becomes a critical socioethical question for Christians, because God redefines fasting by moving beyond the practice itself to include the freedom of and provision for other people, such as sharing bread with the hungry and clothes with the naked. In God's own words through the prophet, God calls for worship as service in the world, in which one's lip service matches one's life service, reframing fasting, therefore worship, as a way of life, not a particular day or a singular practice. God-centered worship will lead to a deeper sense of community in which people work toward the flourishing of all people.

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...loving God is connected to loving one's neighbors...our healing is linked with the healing of others, because we part of the interconnected web of humanity and all of us are truly dust. When the breach of brokenness in a society is bridged and healed, the light of God shines on all. Where there is reconciliation, God is and God's light shines. This is God's promise to us—that when we work to repair the breach between us and our neighbors by repairing the divide between our worship practices and mission in the world, God is present, restoring what was damaged and ravaged to create an eternal communal harmony where all are made whole in the process. (*Connections, Year B, Volume 2*, Eds. Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, et al., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2020. 23).

The prophet is calling the people, is calling each of us to repair the breach and that is done through love. Through love for our neighbors. By feeding and clothing and caring for others. By working to heal the pain and suffering that is in the world.

Now friends, this is where I have to be honest and say that the breach we find in the world today is huge. The divide is significant. The pain and suffering is a lot. And part of that is true, because of this past week's election. Let's be clear, that would have been true no matter which way the election went. And yes, former President Trump won the election, and we know that there are people celebrating and rejoicing because of that. We also know that there are people who are sad, disappointed, frustrated. And there are people who are downright terrified because of those results. And if we're honest with ourselves we knew this would be the case. We've seen the divisions and the breach grow in this country more and more over the past months and years. Still, part of our work is to build the bridge, repair the breach, to care for our neighbors, and to help bring about a world where all of God's children know they are loved and cared for.

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Part of doing that, as I've said before, is knowing the stories. Knowing and learning why the breach is there. Why the divisions exist. Understanding why people are standing where they are. So, I want to share a few stories, anecdotes, and information to try and explain why the breach is even larger after the election. Things that I think we need to know.

I think you need to know that one of my pastor friends who lives in Nebraska was driving his 14-year-old daughter to school this past Wednesday and, entirely unprompted, she turned to him and said, "Dad, do you think I need to go on birth control in case I'm raped?" You might think, oh, that'll never happen. But then I think you need to know there is a saying going around many groups of men right now, especially white men, and it is, "Your body, my choice. Forever." A young girl was suspended from school because she punched a male classmate who said this to her. Her mom complained that the classmate needed to be suspended as well, for what he said is a veiled threat of rape. And it is. And he was.

I think you need to know that women my age and younger are choosing not to have biological children because we know the legal protections we depended on for healthcare no longer exist. And that we fear, even more than losing those protections, that our freedom to even make that decision about whether or not to have children will be lost.

I think you need to know that in 2023, the rate of food insecurity for families across the nation increased to 13.5%, the highest level in nearly a decade. Our local food pantry has seen that as the number of families they have served in 2024 is quadruple those they served in 2022. And I think you need to know that the plans to add tariffs, restrict access to food assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and school meal programs, means that is probably going to get worse.

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I think you need to know that I, and many others, fear for our friends and family members who are in same-sex partnerships and what their lives may look like. I think we need to listen to our siblings of color, to their fears and pain. Clearly, I'm not a person of color so I can't speak to that, but their pain and stories are out there, and we need to seek them out and listen to them.

And I think, I hope, that even if this election had gone the other way, that I would still be here, preaching the same sermon, inviting all of us to hear the fears and pain and stories of the other side. Because there are fears and pain and stories on both sides. And the only way we are going to build this bridge, and repair this breach, is if we are willing to hear the fears and pain of both sides. And then work to find what we have in common. Find where we can stand together, in community and in love. We are called to repair the breach, and friends, we have a lot of work to do. And yes, it will be hard, and heartbreaking, and painful. Still, God calls us to that work, because our lives in the world are part of our worship to God, and they are to reflect what we believe.

That was a lot. And I struggled to figure out a way to wrap all of this up and end. What I found and what I now want to share are two short pieces of poetry. The first is a piece I wrote during Holy Week in April 2017. The second was written by Venice Williams, a black woman who is doing a lot of excellent work around community organizing and food insecurity. She wrote this in the past few days since the election.

Holy Thursday

Tonight
this holy night
my heart is breaking
once again
As I hear Jesus say
Love others
as I have loved you
my heart breaks

As I watch Jesus
become the servant
caring for others
by washing their feet
my heart breaks

For it is Jesus I serve
It is Jesus I follow
and so I try to love others
as Jesus has loved me

But this country I love
this place of my birth
doesn't seem to care
that I love Jesus

As we bomb Syria
and Afghanistan
will North Korea be next...
my leaders don't seem to care
that I love Jesus

As we kill others
the black bodies
and the brown bodies
the Muslim bodies
the Jewish bodies
as they all die
no one seems to care
that I love Jesus

I am one voice
but I will scream to the world
my love for my Savior
and demand that people care
that I love Jesus

For my life is no greater
or no better
or worth more than any other
life in this world

My protection is in God
so please don't kill others
and say it is for my safety
for I would give up my safety
so that all we have killed
would live again

I would stand with them
as Jesus stood with his disciples
and with criminals
and with lepers and sinners
saying that God loves all

But the world doesn't seem to care
that I love Jesus
that I'm trying to love others
as Jesus first loved me
and so this night
this holy night
when Jesus served others first
my heart breaks.

Untitled by Venice Williams

You are awakening to the
same country you fell asleep to.
The very same country.

Pull yourself together.

And,
when you see me,
do not ask me
"What do we do now?
How do we get through the next four years?"

Some of my Ancestors dealt with
at least 400 years of this
under worse conditions.

Continue to do the good work.
Continue to build bridges not walls.
Continue to lead with compassion.
Continue the demanding work
of liberation for all.
Continue to dismantle broken systems,
large and small.
Continue to set the best example
for the children.
Continue to be a vessel of nourishing joy.

Continue right where you are.
Right where you live into your days.

Do so in the name of
The Creator who expects
nothing less from each of us.

And if you are not "continuing"
ALL of the above,
in community, partnership, collaboration?
What is it you have been doing?
What is it you are waiting for?

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We do this work together. And we will continue to do this work, which is why in eleven days we will have a food pantry dinner. And we will work to support others and end food insecurity. It's why we participate in the Christmas Angels program. It's why we do what we do as a church and why we do it together. And I want to keep doing that. I want to continue to be a repairer of the breach, for God calls all of us to be repairers of the breach. So, if you're sad or upset or angry or frustrated or disappointed, whatever you are feeling this day, if you are happy or rejoicing, take a moment with that. That's okay. To rest. To take a breath. But then let's continue. So that we might be called repairers of the breach. Really, what are we waiting for? Let's answer God's call. And we do it all with God's help, thank goodness, because we know that we couldn't do it all on our own. Thanks be to God.