

The Church We Can Be

As many of you know, I am a voracious reader. I have been since I was a child. As an only child until I was nearly eight and as part of a family that moved a good deal, books were my most reliable friends. As I grew, I also came to see books as wonderful sources of information about the world around me as well as parts of the world that I'd not yet experienced, then as information about parts of the human condition which I'd not yet experienced. When I was in the fifth or sixth grade, my school participated in a program with the now-defunct St. Louis Globe-Democrat in which each student received a daily copy of that morning newspaper and I added to my reading the habit which I've never lost of reading the newspaper each day. I read (and read) to learn, to expand my knowledge, to become better or more proficient in parts of my life. The Bible has been a constant part of my reading over the years, not just for classes or sermon or lesson preparation but so that I can learn to be a better disciple of Jesus, a better human being. And as I embarked on professional life, first in the theatre and the broader world of non-profit management and then as a pastor, I began to read professional journals, again looking for ways to get better at what I was doing.

The internet has facilitated my reading habit as I now receive weekly digests by e-mail with links to articles that may be of interest and news sites are readily available. My friends and colleagues also post links to articles on Facebook which I follow up depending on my interest and time available. All in all, I am happily deluged with an abundance of reading material from which to learn.

Recently, there has been a spate of articles and books in my professional journals and on the internet on the current state of the Church and speculations about its future. I'm sure it comes no surprise to any of you that recent polls show that the fastest growing segment in American religious life and not just in the Northwest is the "Nones," those who claim no religious affiliation. Less widely reported, however, are the findings by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution that also show strong growth in the category of "Religious Progressives." This younger, more racially diverse cohort is on the leading edge of another trend in American religion as well. The PRRI report shows that nearly six out of ten Americans say that being a religious person "is primarily about living a good life and doing the right thing." Faith without works, they would agree, is dead.

What these primarily under-50 folks are interested in, the poll shows, are religious communities that don't merely talk about their faith but put it into action. They don't care nearly as much about orthodoxy, having a carefully worked out theology, as they do about orthopraxy, living lives that show forth the ideals that religions claim. They are not interested in religious communities that attempt to debunk science by standing against evolution or climate change. They are not interested in religious communities that discriminate against women or gays or people of other races. They are interested in issues like economic inequality and creation care. They are interested in feeding hungry people. They are interested, in other words, in justice.

Of course, any time we talk about justice in a religious context, we have a rich tradition to which we can refer for guidelines in how to live with justice. That tradition is found in the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament and chief among those writings, both in length and in esteem, is the Book of Isaiah. As I have mentioned before, both from the pulpit and in "Soup, Salad & Soul," Isaiah seems to have been a great influence on Jesus. His sermon in Nazareth which

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contains what some have called his “mission statement” is taken from two readings in Isaiah. The book itself is made up of the writings or remembered teachings of what scholars now believe were at least three men working at different times in Israel’s history but with very similar understandings of God’s call upon the Chosen People. Our Scripture this morning comes from the third of these writers, to whom chapters 56-66 are generally attributed.

These chapters appear to have been written in the years following the return of the Jews from their exile in Babylon. It is unclear whether or not the Temple has yet been rebuilt but we know from other Old Testament writers that even when that work was done it was considered a poor replacement for the remembered beauty of Solomon’s Temple. Brian Jones of Wartburg College describes the setting in this way: “Rebuilding the temple and the city was moving slowly, perhaps stalled completely. Leadership within the community was contested. Divisions and violent quarreling hindered progress in both physical and social restoration. Drought and food shortages exacerbated the social strife and made rebuilding difficult. Economic and social inequity -- homelessness, hunger, lack of clothing -- threatened the stability and identity of the returned community.”

It’s not hard to see the parallels with the state of the Church and society in America in 2013. Like the Jews of Isaiah’s time, many Christians look at their churches or the Church as a whole and see only faded glory in comparison to the full pews and busy programs of decades past. Meanwhile, on the national political scene, leadership is “contested” to the point of legislative gridlock – partisanship is full-blown and viciously ugly. Although our superior food supply chain has not buckled under the pressure of the droughts that have stricken parts of our country in recent years, we cannot ignore the effects of climate change. More to the point, we suffer from food shortages with a different cause – the greed that puts people out of work and refuses to help them by defunding food stamp and other programs or destroying perfectly good food that can no longer attract top dollar prices. The economic inequity that Jones cites in fifth century BCE Israel is the same issue that young Christians today decry in America. There is no reason acceptable to God for small numbers of people to live in extravagance while so many are homeless, hungry, and lacking in what are now seen as the basic pleasures of life.

In Isaiah 58, God through the prophet addresses those in Israel who think if they get worship right all will be well. Their petition to God is repeated in verse 3: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Then comes God’s response: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” Their worship practices are empty because they are not truly reflected in their day to day lives. They continue to take advantage of those who work for them. They continue to allow division and bitterness and violence rule their relationships instead of the love to which God calls them.

Isaiah tells the people what sort of fast is acceptable to God in words that should sound familiar to us: “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 your own people?” If that doesn’t ring a bell for you, listen to this

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passage, just three chapters later, Isaiah 61:1-2: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...” Both of these passages are announcements of the Year of Jubilee, the year when all debts are forgiven, land restored to the landless, and slaves set free. The latter is also the basis for that sermon of Jesus’ in Nazareth which I mentioned earlier. It is part, at least, of the heart of the Good News.

Moving ahead in what Dr. Jones calls this “chapter of the Acceptable Fast,” the prophet continues in verse 9 to detail what God expects from God’s people: “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil...” How can we understand these archaic terms for life today? I think we know well enough about the speaking of evil. It comes in so many forms: gossip, lies, prejudice, bullying. Our society, it seems, thrives on it. “The pointing of the finger” may require a little more thought. It is certainly the image of accusation which can also lead to the evils of scapegoating (blaming our problems on another) and alibi-making (attributing the evil we’ve done to someone else). It is also, according to those familiar with ancient and modern Middle-Eastern culture, a signal of contempt for the one who is pointed at. Along with eschewing these behaviors, says Isaiah, we must also learn to “remove the yoke,” that is, to remove unfair burdens which we or society have placed on others.

As I was thinking of this verse this week, I watched a video which several of my friends posted on Facebook and which I, in turn, posted on the Good Shepherd Baptist Facebook page with a recommendation that you all watch it. Did any of you get the chance to do so? For those who didn’t, the video was of a woman telling the story of a shopping trip she took with her sister in law. The storyteller is a middle-aged, well-dressed, well-spoken Black woman. Her sister in law is a biracial woman who appears White. When they went to check out, the sister in law went first. The cashier, a young White woman, engaged her in animated and friendly conversation, accepted her check without question and allowed her to move on. When the storyteller approached the counter with her purchases, all conversation ceased. When she began to write a check in payment, she was told she needed two forms of ID. The cashier then pointedly and slowly began looking for her name on a list of those who had written bad checks. The sister in law, waiting for the storyteller a short distance away, took the initiative in a calm, non-hostile, but forceful way. “Why are you doing this to her?” she asked. “You didn’t do it to me.” The manager was summoned; apologies were made. The women left the store with their purchases.

That, it seems to me, is a wonderful example of “lifting the yoke.” The sister in law observed the injustice being perpetrated against the storyteller. She used her power of White privilege or, in this case, perceived White privilege, to challenge the injustice, to lift the yoke of prejudice from her kinswoman. Perhaps the young cashier and her manager learned something; perhaps not. But the storyteller was reminded that people can do the right thing, can make a difference. More importantly, her 10-year old daughter, who witnessed the entire exchange, was reminded that she need not be a victim; that she need not wear the yoke of inappropriate expectations. One of the important lessons I’ve learned in our Evergreen Association, where our Euro church is joined together with churches whose members are Black, Asian or Hispanic, is that those of us of primarily Euro or White heritage carry privilege in this society to which we are mostly blind.

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We must learn to recognize this and use the privilege that society unthinkingly assigns us to help lift the yoke from our Black and Brown sisters and brothers.

Isaiah goes on to lift up the other actions of justice, offering food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted. I think Good Shepherd Baptist has a long, rich tradition of involvement in these areas. That doesn't mean that I think we should be satisfied with what we are doing or rest on our laurels. As Mary Lu McDaniels has reminded us, our donations to the Food Bank have dwindled in recent month. I can testify that the barrels in our Narthex have been mostly empty this summer, more so than I can remember in my eight and a half years as your pastor. Let's get busy with this, shall we? We also need to be ready to resume and even increase our involvement with those experiencing homelessness in our area. The operations of the Emergency Cold Weather Shelter in our area are once again being debated. It is possible that our building will once again become a location for the overnight stay of these vulnerable folks. And volunteers will again be needed for the overnight fire watch as well as for making and serving dinner and breakfast. I encourage all of you to consider this work. A friendly greeting, caring service or, even better, someone who will sit and eat and chat with these men and women can go a long way in lifting the yokes they feel from being outside normal society, from being ill-clothed and, yes, possibly dirty and smelly, and for some of them from being addicted. I can tell you from my own experience that the temporary discomfort you may feel from sitting with someone who hasn't had a shower in a week will be more than compensated by the warmth and gratitude you are quite likely to receive in return.

At the end of our chapter, the prophet returns to the opening topic in a slightly different form: what does it mean to truly honor the day of worship? Certainly what it didn't and doesn't mean is "serving (our) own interests, or pursuing (our) own affairs." I don't hear in this a call to spend all Sunday at the church, as many of us did in our youth, or to refrain from all things pleasurable on the Sabbath, as the Puritans taught. Instead, I'd refer back to the beginning of the chapter, where the Lord calls Israel out for oppressing workers on the fast day. Again, I don't think we should interpret this as a return to Blue Laws. In our multicultural nation, these laws are discriminatory against all those whose worship day is not Sunday, such as our brethren in the Seventh Day denominations, Jews and Muslims. What I do hear is an admonition to make sure everyone gets at least one day in seven to rest. Part of that means being sure that everyone can afford to take the day off. I've spoken before about the outrageous number of hours that those working in minimum wage jobs, often multiple minimum wage jobs, have to work in order to make enough money to live in our very expensive region. We should all be supporting the effort to raise the minimum wage for airport workers and, indeed, to raise the minimum both state and nationwide. In the interests of Biblical justice, we should all be supporting affordable health care to reduce the burden on those whose employers are not covering them. Whether we think the current solution is the right one or not, anything that gets our country closer to universal coverage is far preferable to no action at all. We cannot allow ourselves to participate in a system that oppresses those who harvest or serve our food or stock the shelves of the stores we frequent.

Isaiah promises his hearers that if they follow the guidelines that God has set for them to live with integrity and justice that they shall be known as "the repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live in." Potholes aside, we do not, like Isaiah's post-exilic listeners, live in a city in

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ruins. We do not live in fear of attack because Lynnwood or Edmonds or Mill Creek has no great city walls to keep out marauders. But there is a sense in which we feel we live in a hostile climate, not due to holes in the walls but due to the breaches in relationships between neighbors. We don't know each other, by and large, and we probably don't trust each other. Very few of us have neighbors with whom we share our daily joys and sorrows. Very few of us now feel comfortable in going and knocking next door to borrow a cup of sugar, let alone to share a cup of coffee and weep over loss or confess a need.

Another story that gained some attention last week, however, illustrates for me what it means to "repair the breach" today. How many of you were aware that this past Tuesday a young man slipped past the security at an Atlanta-area elementary school with an assault rifle and 500 rounds of ammunition and, by his own words, "nothing to live for?" If you didn't hear about that incident, it's like because of a woman named Antoinette Tuff. A secretary at the school, she engaged the young man in kind and caring conversation. She told him about her own life, about being abandoned by her husband of 33 years, about caring for a multiply-disabled son. "We all go through something in life," the 911 tapes record her as saying to him. When he said he had no one who cared to listen to his troubles, she replied, "I'm sitting here with you and talking to you about it." She began to talk to him about putting down his weapons and surrendering to the police, with whom he'd already exchanged shots. On the 911 tapes, she can be heard saying, "We not going to hate you, baby. It's a good thing that you're giving up, so we're not going to hate you." Instead of being in the newspapers as a villain, the young man got Antoinette Tuff's caring attention, attention he craved. Her kind listening prompted him to confess that he was off his meds because his benefits had run out. She offered to act as a human shield for him if he'd put down his gun and walk out of the building. When he agreed, she said that she loved him, cared about him and was proud of him. She repaired the breach between 20-year-old Michael Brandon Hill and the society from which he felt cut off. Antoinette Huff's approach probably wouldn't have worked in every school shooting case but it worked in that one. And if more of us were more concerned about repairing the breaches that exist between us and our neighbors, there might be fewer cases like it.

Good Shepherd Baptist Church, our Loving Creator, the Restless Weaver, is calling to us. God reminds us not to be concerned for our future but to live lives of integrity and justice. As Jesus said, we must let our light so shine that our neighbors will see our good works and give glory to God. If we continue to care for those in need around us, if we stand willing to give our all to help them, we will become known as the repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live in. The young people of our country are hungry for communities which act on the values that they share with Jesus, the one who gave even his life to bring humankind into restored relationship with God. May love be our currency and kindness our law as we move out into the world with the blessings God has already granted us. Amen.