

“Repairers of the Breach”
by Rev. David J. Wood
4th Sunday After Epiphany
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First Congregational Church of Camden

Isaiah 58: 9b-12

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
 you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."
If you remove the yoke from among you,
 the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
 and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
 and your gloom be like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually
 and satisfy your needs in parched places
 and make your bones strong,
 and you shall be like a watered garden,
 like a spring of water whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
 you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
 the restorer of streets to live in.

Matthew 5:13-20

'You are the salt of the earth;
 but if salt has lost its taste,
 how can its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything,
 but is thrown out and trampled under foot.
'You are the light of the world.
 A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.
 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
 but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.
In the same way, let your light shine before others,
 so that they may see your good works
 and give glory to your Father in heaven.
'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;
 I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.
For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away,
 not one letter, not one stroke of a letter,
 will pass from the law until all is accomplished.
Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments,
 and teaches others to do the same,
 will be called least in the kingdom of heaven;
but whoever does them and teaches them
 will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds
that of the scribes and Pharisees,
 you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

There's a story I heard years ago about one of the greatest NFL coaches of all time, Vince Lombardi. Probably apocryphal...

Took place in July of 1961, it was the first day of training camp for the 38 players on his Green Bay Packers football team. The prior season had ended in a heartbreaking loss to the Philadelphia Eagles after blowing a lead in the 4th quarter of the NFL Championship Game...which, of course, is the game we now call the Super Bowl.

When they sat down for their first team meeting that day, Lombardi held up a football and said,
"Gentlemen, this is a football!"

The story goes, that a big lineman in the back of the room, yelled out, "Whoah, Coach. Slow it down a bit."

He then had everyone open up their playbooks and start on page one, where they began to learn the fundamentals - blocking, tackling, throwing, catching, etc.

That season they beat the New York Giants in NFL Championship Game, 37-0.

Annual Meeting Sunday...good time to go back to the playbook. I have come to believe that this text from Matthew is one that gets us back to fundamentals of what it means to be a church, a congregation...

It behooves us to re-hear it, to rehearse in our worship again and again. It says something about us that we would never dare to say about ourselves.

It feels too lofty, too oversized, too presumptuous to ever claim for ourselves. Nevertheless, here it is, spoken by Jesus to those in his company seeking to be among his followers.

Jesus is not commanding them to be something,
or calling on them to strive to become something.

He is telling them who they are by virtue of God's spirit at work in and among them:
You are the salt of the earth!
You are the light of the world!

We are not here for ourselves.

We are here for the sake of the earth,
the sake of the world.

And as Jesus warns, we can forget who we are. We can lose our saltiness...we can hide our light.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel voices that warning when he wrote:

"Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.

When faith is completely replaced by creed,
worship by discipline,

love by habit;
when the crisis of today is ignored
because of the splendor of the past;
when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks
only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion –
its message becomes meaningless.”

“What young people need,” he wrote, “is not religious tranquilizers, religion as
diversion, religion as entertainment, but spiritual audacity, intellectual guts, the power
of defiance!”

That’s salt of the earth, light of the world talk right there.

we lose our bearings...we need to return to the beginning...and begin again...that’s what we do
here...that’s what we’re doing here...
Worship is the locker room that equips us to perform on the playing field. This is not the
playing field.

I had a moment earlier this week...as is my morning routine, I had just finished reading the
summary of the NYT headlines, the highlights of the Washington Post, and then I read Heather
Cox Richardson’s post. As I sat there staring at my screen, I had this sense of being
overwhelmed, even demoralized...the breach seems to be widening...

THE BREACH of trust, of justice, of mercy, of empathy and compassion...and a growing
justification for meanness, antipathy, and cruelty. All of which is tearing our social fairing to
shreds.

As someone I read this week put it....

How do we keep from numbing in a world drowning in human suffering?

*Is it even possible to stay compassionate and vulnerable and healthy, while holding the vastness
of the pain around us?*

*How do we not fill up with the cumulative toll of other people’s suffering, or grow callous to their
wounds?*

Returning to this place...to be in the company of faith and friends...doing things in common
that keeps me from retreating into a smaller more manageable, self centered world.

I came across a New Yorker cartoon earlier this week:

Two wealthy businessmen in high wingback chair...probably sitting in some exclusive
club. One says to the other, “I too longed to find a cause greater than myself. [pause].
Fortunately, I never did.”

At its best, worship is that shared practice of opening ourselves up, offering ourselves to
something, someone greater, more true, more whole, than ourselves.

The shared things we do here...sharing communion, song, prayer, reading scripture, passing
the peace to one another.

These things are never to be a substitute for what we need to be about in the world...but they serve as the reminder of what we are and who we are to be in the midst of the world.

You, no doubt, have noticed that worship involves a good deal of repetition. While it is true, that repetition can become rote, mindless, and forgettable

Repetition is also how we learn things by heart. Through the sights, sounds, words, and gestures that constitute the practice of worship, our hearts are being formed.

Rabbi Sharon Brouse, reflecting on worship in her community, puts it this way:

At its core of our practice of worship, of being a community of faith...“is the firmly held belief that we who hold a dream of building a different kind of society must begin by building a different kind of community.” [Brouse, Sharon. *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*]

By God’s grace, we are learning “to build a different kind of community;” by God’s grace, in the words we read from the Prophet Isaiah, we are learning what it means to be “*repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets we live in...*”

Unlike Las Vegas...what happens here...does not stay here!

We are salt for the earth...light for the world.

It must be said...that recognizing that breach – the breach between what is and what ought to be, can be tricky.

Did you notice the verse where Jesus says, “I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets.”

That is sign that this was an accusation being leveled against Jesus and his teaching. An accusation that was being made by those who were the, in his religious community, the interpreters and enforcers of the Divine Law – the exemplars of righteousness. The ones Jesus names as the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus went on to say, that those who belonged to the Kingdom of God were those whose righteousness exceeded, surpassed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

The Scribes and the Pharisees were those whose were known for keeping the letter of the law but lost its spirit. The law had ceased to be ordered by love. Their righteousness, which they claimed to be God’s righteousness, had become brittle and hard edged, merciless and heartless, even inhumane. You could say, they had weaponized righteousness.

In Romans 13...Pauls sums up Jesus’ teachings this way: “The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery or murder or steal or covet...or any other commandment are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

To be salt of the earth and light of the world is to embody an EXCESSIVE form of righteousness. Without it, the rule of law will not produce a good and just society.

The history of law in our own country illustrates this.

It would take more than 70 years after our Constitution became the established law of the land for slavery to be abolished, for all citizens to be guaranteed due process and equal protection under the law...and for all citizens to be granted the right to vote.

According to the law of the land, women were denied the right to vote until 1920, according to the law of the land, Native Americans were denied the right to vote until 1924 and African Americans' right to vote was not guaranteed until 1965. Social Security was enacted into law in 1935; same sex marriage only became legal in 2015. The list goes on...

What seemed acceptable, right and just to one generation became unacceptable, wrong and unjust to a succeeding generation. All these amendments and legislative actions were never intended to abolish the law of the land – but to fulfill it.

The building of a good and just society requires a people whose sense of righteousness is ordered by love...

For those who identify as Christians, they are not the way they are because they are republicans or a democrats or independents...or even because they are Americans...their identity goes much deeper than that...it is because they have come to know themselves as the Salt of the earth and light of the world.

To be the salt of the earth and the light of the world is to be found among those who are the repairers of the BREACH between what is and what ought to be.

In closing, I leave you with these timely words from the theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;
therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;
therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;
therefore we must be saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint.

Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love
which is forgiveness.” [From, *The Irony of American History*, by Reinhold Niebuhr].

Amen.