



“Repairers of the Breach”

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***Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 6, 2011
Isaiah 58:1–12 (NRSV)***

They were exiles. Captives of war, dragged off against their will to Babylon, refugees from defeated, destroyed Jerusalem. They had been living in a foreign land, preserving what they could of their culture, listening to their priests and prophets, trying not to give up hope. Five years, ten, twenty. The years creep by . . . thirty, forty, until there are few left alive who ever lived in Jerusalem, who remember the long journey into exile. But the day comes when even mighty Babylon is conquered by Persia, and the exiles are finally free to go home.

It is 500 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem, but the route that takes the exiles home is perhaps double that, a winding caravan route that is probably a thousand miles or more, and they are weeks on the road. Can you imagine them? A ragtag band of captives coming back to a place called home, a place they barely remember, or know only through the stories of their old ones. And what do they see as they catch that first glimpse of Jerusalem? A landscape parched with decay, a city in ruins, and, high on the hill, a temple devastated.

Their return was not the triumphant, glorious homecoming they had been promised in the prophecies. They did not return as a mighty force to a shining city. They returned to rubble and ruin, and had to begin the long, hard labor of rebuilding, rolling up their sleeves and getting to work, rebuilding homes, fields and orchards, commerce, and the center of their spiritual lives, the temple on the high hill.

But the work wasn't easy, nor was it joyful. A new foundation of the temple was laid in, and then the project was abandoned. Such massive work takes common effort, and it was too big an undertaking for so few, and the times were wretched, their lives hard and uncertain. They were profoundly disillusioned. Despite following the law, despite keeping the practices of their faith, after all their hardship, their lives were not restored. What was going on here? Where was God?

The people cry out in lament: “Where is our justice? Where is our righteousness? We wait for the light, but instead we are sitting in darkness. We grope along a wall like a person without sight. We stumble at noon as if it were twilight. We move among the living as though we were dead. Our lives are so miserable. Look, God, we are fasting to please you. Why don't you

notice us? We fast to remember the siege and fall of our city. We fast to remember the destruction of the temple. We fast to remember our captivity. Why should we humble ourselves like this, if you are not going to notice us?”

And, through the prophet, God answers: “What good is your fasting, if your workers are oppressed? What good is your fasting if you are quarrelling with your neighbors? What good is your fasting if there is still injustice and oppression in your own community? What good is your fasting if you ignore the hungry and the homeless and the naked, and even your family who are in need? What good is your fasting if all the captives are not freed? This is not the fast that I choose for you. If you want the light to dispel the gloom, if you want to be like a watered garden, if you want to rebuild your lives, then you must practice righteousness.”

What does it mean to practice righteousness? What does it mean to be righteous? In our postmodern context, with its excessive emphasis on individualism and personal freedoms above all else, we have some trouble with the idea of righteousness. I think perhaps we associate being righteous with being self-righteous, that kind of person who follows the rules obsessively and points the finger of shame at anyone who doesn't. But righteousness is a critical concept in the Bible. The Hebrew word for righteousness, *tzedek*, and its Greek equivalent, *dikaio*s, appear hundreds of times throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. It is a theological concept that we can't just ignore.

Righteousness doesn't mean excessively following the rules, just to follow the rules. In Hebrew, the root of the word *tzedek* is the same as the root for the concept of justice, as well as the concept of charity. The theological concept of righteousness is linked to the moral imperative to care for each other. It is the call to the restoration of justice. It is the call to live in right relationship with God, to align ourselves with God and God's love and care for all creation. It is the recognition that we are not just a collection of individuals, but a community that functions in connection with each other, that belongs to something greater than itself. To live righteously is to be a repairer of the breach—to repair the breach in the bulwark of charity and justice that holds communities together. To live righteously is to repair the breach between ourselves and our neighbors.

They were exiles. For the elders of this community, exile and evacuation were a familiar experience, because so many had come to New Orleans as refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Evacuated during the hurricane, or forced to flee their parish in New Orleans East as the floodwaters of Katrina breached the levies and inundated their homes. They ended up in Texas, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia—every corner of the southeastern United States, far from their homes.

Many had been fishing families in Vietnam, and so many became fishers and shrimpers in New Orleans; their children grew and married and fished with their families or opened small businesses in this upper corner of the Ninth Ward. They grew accustomed to the foreign land but maintained what they could of their culture. For the vast majority of the Vietnamese residents of New Orleans East, some six thousand of them, the spiritual center of their community, and the place they turned for help and refuge during the storm, was Mary Queen

of Vietnam Catholic church. And when they returned home, it was the church that continued to be the anchor of the neighborhood.

When the exiles finally made the journey home, they returned to rubble and ruin, the decay of mold and the wrack of receding floodwaters, streets lined with mud-caked cars, every home unlivable, and their beloved church with a severely damaged roof. But to these exiles, rebuilding was a familiar experience, and they did not do it alone. They understood that they were not just a collection of individuals, but a community deeply connected with each other, belonging to something greater than itself. Each family worked to rebuild their home, and if a family did not have enough hands to get the work done, neighbors helped each other. Together they rebuilt the church. The first grocery store that reopened in the neighborhood extended credit to those who had trouble paying. Righteousness in action. Right relationship. Justice. Charity. Within months, nearly half of the families in the parish had returned. Within a year, the parish was nearly recovered. The neighborhood around the church became an oasis in a desert of abandonment.

And the work didn't stop with rebuilt homes and a rebuilt church. When the schools had trouble staying open, the parish started an intercultural charter school. When the two hospitals in New Orleans East remained closed and healthcare was impossible to find anywhere near the neighborhood, the parish found a way to open two clinics. When the city opened a landfill two miles from the community before anyone had been able to return home to protest, the parish got the landfill closed. And when the BP Oil Spill threatened the livelihoods of the fishing families, the community faced off against the corporate giant, to advocate for a just response. This is righteousness. Right relationship. Justice. Charity.

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.

May it be so. Amen.