

REPAIRING THE BREACH

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Texts: Isaiah 58:7–14

Thank you, Pastor Davis, it is an honor to be with you this morning. I love your emphasis on “Deep Roots—Strong Spirit—Bright Future.”

[Rev. Taylor here spoke some impromptu words about Sojourners and his Baptist background.]

In his final book, Martin Luther King Jr. asked the still salient and provocative question, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Just before his assassination, King sensed that the nation was at a dangerous crossroads as he witnessed the stall of the civil rights movement and the rise of rampant violence. The country was embroiled in the Vietnam War and was coming apart at the seams due to culture clashes.

After race riots raged across the country in the late 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to investigate the causes. The commission’s report shined a necessary spotlight on deep-seated poverty and institutionalized racism, warning that the United States was poised to fracture into two radically unequal societies—one Black, one white. The report’s research and recommendations are still deeply instructive and relevant to the ongoing pandemic of systemic racism, including the report’s prescient conclusion that “discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American.”

We are again at a crossroads moment, which has been exposed by the COVID-19 crisis, the racial justice awakening summer of 2020 sparked by the horrific murder of George Floyd, and the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

My remix of Dr. King’s prescient and provocative question is, “Where Do We Go from Here: Toxic Polarization or the Beloved Community?”

[Rev. Taylor then extemporized on several topics: the nation hasn’t been this polarized since the height of the 1960s; the resurgence of white Christian nationalism—heresy and political ideology that America rightfully belongs to white Christians; and how dislike and distrust have turned into contempt toward the other.]

The church is also at an inflection point. Breaches in our politics and culture have also seeped into many of our churches. Churches are increasingly self-sorting based on political ideology and preference. Far too many churches have become more known for who and how they exclude rather than who and how they embrace. Many churches are embroiled in financial and sexual scandals. Yes the breach is within the body of Christ as well.

Last year, Gallup caused a stir when it released new research showing Americans’ membership in houses of worship fell below 50 percent for the first time in the 80 years Gallup has been keeping track. According to Gallup’s data, in 2020, only “47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999,” continuing a steady decline that started near the turn of the 21st century.

Barna's groundbreaking research in the early 2000s found that the exodus of young Christians from the church was being driven by the predominant perceptions that the church was hypocritical, homophobic, and overly judgmental. The unholy marriage between the Religious Right and former President Trump has only exacerbated many of these perceptions and accelerated this trend.

I have long believed that churches that preach and live out a radical and inclusive love ethic and that are committed to standing for justice represent the most effective way we can rehabilitate the very witness and reputation of the church. Young Christians have not fallen out of love with Jesus—they have fallen out of love with the hypocrisy and sometimes corrupt politics of the church. Instead, the church should be on the cutting edge of living out and building the Beloved Community. The church should be the place and space where the beatitudes are felt and where a radical, inclusive love is the norm, not the exception. And we must be crystal clear—this radical, inclusive love that does justice is because of, not in spite of our deep respect for and commitment to scripture.

Yes, Plymouth, we are facing a breach in our nation's soul that seems to be growing ever wider.

Many factors are causing and exacerbating this breach. When trust in our political institutions and politicians is at an all time low, **we face a breach.** When 83% of Congressional elections in 2020 were decided in the primary, where only 10% of the electorate actually votes—**we face a breach.** When lies, disinformation, and even conspiracy theories have become normalized in our public life, **we face a breach.** When a zero sum and us-versus-them mentality has seized our politics—suffocating our ability to find common ground, **we face a breach.** When a conservative majority on the Supreme Court can strip away a 50-year judicial precedent stripping away reproductive rights, **we face a breach.** When our nation has more guns than people and gun violence has become the leading cause of death for children, **we face a breach.** When dreamers are still denied permanent citizenship and people seeking asylum are often denied this human right due to a severely broken immigration system, **we face a breach.** When over 47,000 Americans committed suicide this past year and over 400,000 Americans died of an overdose, **we face a breach.** When an estimated 140 million Americans are low wealth or living in poverty, **we face a breach.** When racially motivated violent extremism is on the rise; when a surge of hate crimes targets Asian Americans; when the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, **we face a breach.** When due to our addiction to carbon and failed political leadership our planet is on a collision course with climate change, **we face a breach!** When school districts across the country and over 12 states have passed regressive laws that censor and ban the teaching of the fullness of our nation's history—the good, the bad, and the ugly, when nearly 400 bills have been proposed in every state across the country erecting new barriers suppressing the right to vote, **we are indeed facing a breach that is growing ever wider.**

These and so many other sobering trends point to a crisis that is not just political but also spiritual and existential. They point for the need not simply for incremental change but for fundamental transformation. Yes we must change policy and laws, but we must also change hearts and minds.

The Prophet Isaiah also knew something about breaches. When I think about the breach of toxic polarization in our nation, my spirit keeps coming back to this text, which has so much to say in this perilous moment in this nation and world: In this 58th chapter, Isaiah speaks to the more expansive vocation of the church, helping us to deepen and transform the church's ecclesiology to focus far beyond a privatized and individualist Gospel and break out of the four walls of the church. Yes this text is also central to an expanded sense of soteriology (doctrine of salvation). Our faith can't be reduced only to salvation—we are saved to be enlisted in God's project of advancing God's reign of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness, which is aligned with the work to build a radically more just, inclusive, and democratic America. Finally, this text is central to our missiology. I'm proud that Sojourners' mission is to articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church and the world. In the seminal book *God and the Ghetto*, William Augustus Jones

Jr. puts it this way, “America was built on a toxic theology (how we see God) that has shaped our anthropology (how we see people) and produced a sinful sociology (how we arrange systems, structures).”

First we must place this passage in its proper context. As my seminary Dean so often said, any text taken out of its context means you can be easily conned. In this passage, the prophet Isaiah is addressing Israel roughly between 700 and 800 B.C.E., a generation after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire and the deportation of the Jews to Babylon. In other words, the Israelites are still suffering from a great deal of trauma, loss, and anguish. Isaiah’s primary ministry is to the people of Judah, who refused to live according to God’s law. Isaiah preaches a message of repentance and salvation for those who would turn to and lean on God. As we enter into this season of Advent, it is important to note that the prophet Isaiah contains the most Messianic prophecies of any Old Testament Book, including Isaiah 9:6: For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

In this 58th chapter, Isaiah begins by asking a poignant and provocative question—what kind of fasting (or put more broadly—religious worship) pleases and honors God? Isn’t that a question we should also be asking today? In verse four he makes clear why this question must be asked, saying, “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.”

Then Isaiah asks, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

He sees the Israelites going through the motions of worship, often for the same reason as the pagans—to manipulate God to act in their favor. To the degree that rituals become patterns, they can become a barrier to our discipleship and no longer serve as an act of devotion that deepens our faith and relationship with God. Far too often, our own worship can become overly transactional—starting with what we hope to get from God rather than focused on trying to enter into a deeper relationship with God. God is our Lord and Liberator, not our heavenly ATM machine or genie in a bottle.

Yes, Isaiah asks the timeless question, “What kind of worship honors and pleases God?” This is an ever-present question. Is it the size of our church building, the volume of our praise, the impressiveness of our choir? What truly is God’s preferred form of praise? As important as these can be, worship can’t be reduced to entertainment.

Instead Isaiah makes it crystal clear that worship that pleases God must loose chains of injustice and feed the hungry! Isaiah rejects shallow and superficial expressions of worship that are disconnected from the works of justice and compassion. Isaiah is warning us to not let our religious worship devolve into a purely private and personal enterprise. Worship is meant to have profound communal impact on the streets around us. Yes, acts of justice and compassion should be the very fruits, the byproducts of our worship.

Let’s pause for a second and note that Isaiah starts with the call to loosen the chains of injustice and then emphasizes sharing our food with the hungry. This is important because far too often our churches start and end with compassion—and then rarely demonstrate a commensurate commitment to justice, to challenging and dismantling systems and structures. Justice cannot be a reduced to purely a philanthropic or charitable exercise.

As David Gushee and Glenn Stassen posit in *Kingdom Ethics*, the Old Testament Prophets and Jesus understood that justice requires identifying and addressing root causes of people’s pain and suffering—

namely four root causes that include: exploitation (Jesus in the temple), domination, violence, and exclusion from community. These are interlocking and often found in combination with each other. Yes, loosening chains of injustice requires identifying and addressing root causes.

Then this is the part that always makes me want to shout, starting in verse 9: “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame.

“You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of the Breach, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”

Now, that will preach. Isaiah makes it clear—in my Black church speak he makes it plain—that our very spiritual health and wholeness is tied into the liberation of others, particularly to those whom Howard Thurman refers to as the disinherited. Our liberation, our wholeness is intertwined. That means that the work of justice and compassion is not only about others being made more whole and free, it is also about all of us being made whole and free. As Fannie Lou Hamer famously said, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

[Rev. Taylor spoke how this ties into one of the principal Beatitudes of building the Beloved Community—the understanding of Ubuntu interdependence, the Golden Rule on Steroids: “I am because we are.” He then spoke of his time in South Africa.]

Yes, our nation is need of hard reset, maybe even what Dr. Eddie Glaude calls a third founding, and Rev. William Barber refers to as a third reconstruction. This kind of transformation requires that we tap into the power of our faith.

Yes, there is a growing breach in our midst. But here’s the good news—we are called to be the repairers—we are the ones that God has commissioned to do the work of repair. How do we do the work of repair? It starts with how we worship. It’s our very worship that equips and empowers us to do the work of justice and compassion.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve had enough of the breaches that afflict our politics, our culture, and the church itself. But I believe in a God who can make all things new. I believe that greater is God in us than we can ever be in the world. I believe we serve a God who promises to make us more than conquerors over even the most intractable Goliaths. I believe that now is the time to remake and transform the church to be salt and light—to repair the many breaches facing the Twin Cities and our nation by building the Beloved Community. Beloved, it is time to repair the breach with our commitment to justice and compassion! It is time to build the Beloved Community. Amen, Amen, Amen.