

“Repair, Restore, Reconcile”

Mark 9:38-50; Isaiah 58:6-12 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 29, 2024
Reconciliation Ministry Worship Emphasis

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that the stumbling blocks might be removed from our hearts. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Are you ever haunted by phrases from scripture? In Deuteronomy, Moses commanded the Hebrew people to “put these words of mine in your heart and your soul,” and in many ways, I think a lot of us assume that is part of a proper relationship with scripture. When a given situation prompts a line from the Bible to appear in our head, we can tell we’ve been paying attention, even if we couldn’t tell you which book or chapter the verse is from.

These verses from Isaiah 58 are prime fodder for words to be haunted by, especially in 2024 Southern California. Our Reconciliation theme this year calls us to be “repairers of the breach.” But it’s the next line that sounds more familiar: our headlines are full of elected officials and wanna-be elected officials sparring over who will be the more effective “restorer of streets to live in.” As per usual, though, they seem to have skipped to the end to get their idea of what restoring the streets means.

I wonder if any of them are haunted by any of the earlier lines? Does your soul ever prod you to “bring the homeless poor into your house”? Do we assume the prophet is talking to someone else when he makes that suggestion? I fear most of us have given up on the idea that such extreme sacrifice could possibly be a requirement for

faithfulness. But perhaps we could stand to be haunted by the admonition “not to hide yourself from your own kin”? Sure, we can usually make room for family. But the context here makes clear that “kin” is not just referring to blood relations.

One of the things you hear most often, if you listen to homeless people talk about their experiences, is the effect it has on your sense of self to have so many people pretend that you’re invisible. We pull up into the left turn lane, and we avert our eyes from the person with the sign, refusing even the occasional freely offered “God bless you.” Our compassion is tapped out for the day; we don’t have any cash on hand. Whatever the reason, we make the choice, conscious or habitual, to hide ourselves from our own kin.

You have heard me talk about Welcome Saturday as a ministry of re-humanization. The guests, our friends who come and spend their Saturday morning here, tell us of the relief it brings to be in a space where they are safe and welcome and loved, where they are treated like human beings. Nobody is averting their eyes, pretending not to see them. They are called by name, and given the choice to have ketchup or hot sauce or neither on their egg casserole, as they prefer. These acts of re-humanization are a vital practice of faith, an acting out of the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. But our guests aren’t the only ones being re-humanized.

I read some of the discourse on social media about our neighbors living without shelter, and I wonder when our society became so cruel. When did it become so normal to look at someone who’s fallen off the bottom edge of life and assume they did

something to deserve it? When did it become okay to condemn those who didn't get the lucky breaks we did, because their attempts to simply live are making us uncomfortable? "Why won't they stay hidden?" we complain loudly, openly denying that "those people" are any kin to us.

Meanwhile, our leaders insist that they are going to "restore streets to live in." Restore them for whom is the question. It's "simply inhumane," one said recently¹, but he wasn't talking about the collective inability or unwillingness of our society to adequately house all our citizens. He was trying to rationalize arresting those who are on the streets because they have nowhere else to go. The homeless are not the only ones in need of re-humanization.

When did we stray so far from the path of recognizing our common humanity? Mother Teresa wisely reminded us that "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other." We have hidden ourselves from our own kin for too long. We've forgotten who we are, who we were created to be, who we are called to follow. In our efforts to secure and justify our own safety and comfort, we have drawn lines too firmly between our deservingness and the have-nottery of others. We find it easy to place blame for the brokenness of our society on those who suffer the most from it. We give in to the temptation of knowing we are "in" because others are "out." The disciples were mad – were they mad? Or were they jealous? Someone was out there, casting out demons in Jesus' name, someone they didn't know who didn't hang around

¹ <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2024/09/17/south-county-cities-move-to-enact-homeless-camping-bans/>

with them, the elite twelve who had been specially chosen. “We tried to stop him,” they proudly and indignantly told Jesus. Somehow they weren’t at all concerned that their jealousy might show through, despite the fact that just a couple days earlier they had tried to cast out an evil spirit and failed. “How dare he?” they must have been thinking. “Jesus is going to set him straight!”

But that’s not what happened, was it? “Leave him be,” Jesus said. “He’s not opposed to us; he can’t be opposed to us. Anyone who brings life or liberation to another for my sake deserves their reward.” You can just hear them sputtering, “but, but, but...” As we’re thinking about the holy and unholy efforts to restore the streets to live in, the disciples’ indignation and desire to make up rules Jesus had no interest in reminds me of the jockeying for money and access that we occasionally read about as different homeless services organizations try to win the approval of politicians more interested in photo ops and good press than in actual solutions that repair people’s lives.

It’s a rather intense passage that we heard there in Mark. Beyond the disciples making fools of themselves, Jesus goes on, with some pretty serious admonitions. We don’t usually hear passages here in worship that use the word “hell” that often! Or “unquenchable fire.” Or the “worm [that] never dies,” whatever that even means!

But do you know what the most important word in that passage is? It’s not “hell,” or even “stumble.” The most important word in that passage is “your.” “If your hand causes you to stumble... if your foot causes you to stumble... if your eye causes you to stumble.” Not if someone else’s hand causes them to stumble. Or if someone else’s

foot causes them to stumble. Or if someone else's eye causes them to stumble. Yours. Mine. Our own. Jesus' most important lessons on judgment are very clear that we are never called to judge others. We are to concern ourselves with our own walk, keeping ourselves from stumbling, not worrying about whether someone else is stumbling, or wandering, or lollygagging, or even skipping ahead to the front of the line. And yet, those kinds of judgments are precisely what keep us from truly restoring our streets for living in. We're so concerned that someone might get something they don't deserve. It's easier to lock people up than to treat them like fellow human beings, let alone our own kin.

This obsession from keeping the undeserving from receiving any benefit has haunted American life for decades. It's why, as Heather McGhee shows, in her book "The Sum of Us," "we can't have nice things."² Racialized ideas about who is deserving and who isn't were embedded so early and so deeply in the psyche of this nation that we don't even realize that we're all impoverished because of them. When we can face our history with courage and wisdom, we can begin to repair the breach that our original sins created. When we can come together across racial divides, across lines of cultural and socio-economic division, we can receive the benefits of what McGhee calls the "Solidarity Dividend." Perhaps there is a reason Isaiah put repairing the breach and restoring the streets so close together in this haunting passage. Rather than our obsessions with division and fairness and who's in and who's out, Isaiah wants us to be

² <https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-sum-of-us-what-racism-costs-everyone-and-how-we-can-prosper-together-heather-mcghee/14618549?ean=9780525509585>

haunted by a vision of what could be: streets full of life and succor and joy, springs of water that do not fail, kin united across lines of race and culture, everyone fed, everyone housed, everyone valued and cherished and seen in the fullness of who they are.

Is this what it means to have God's words in our hearts and souls? To be able to look at the brokenness of our society, the unholy mess in our streets, and overlay a vision of God's shalom? To have the courage to never avert our eyes, but to see our kin in everyone we encounter? To keep our hearts and our thoughts and our discourse from devolving into cruelty and de-humanization? Can we lean on the words God has put in our hearts to keep ourselves from stumbling? May it be so! Hallelujah and Amen!