



First United Church of Oak Park

The Worst Nickname

Isaiah 58

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The people of God were living in exile. It was hard: they were an underclass suffering hunger and oppression, made to serve the interests of the powerful while never getting ahead themselves. For long years, they suffered, dreaming of nothing more than returning home, returning to the holy city.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

They held onto the promises of the prophets like they were promissory notes, like they could redeem them if they could just make it through to the right time.

And remarkably, miraculously, inexplicably, their exile came to an end. Exile came to an end like a lightning bolt, like a thunder crash. The people were allowed to go home, allowed to go back to the holy city, allowed to rebuild. And that's what they did; they recreated what they had known—priests began work centralizing worship in the temple, the wealthy built up farms, the well-connected took up positions of authority. The poor and the marginalized, those who had been the underclass of the underclass in exile, well...their concerns would have to wait. The people recreated what they had known: the good, and the bad. And months pass, and years pass, and there's a problem.

They had been allowed to return, that part of the promises had come true. Buuuuuut none of the rest of it had. Life wasn't joy and gladness, it was hunger and hard work just to survive. The highway, called the Holy Way, it existed in a kind of metaphorical way, but people were not using it. The exiled people of God were simply not returning to Jerusalem. Only a remnant of the remnant had returned; most people had had enough of world-changing events and were content to live under the rule of whoever it was who was in power at that time. Why try to build a society; it's hard enough to just build your own life.

So for the people who had returned, who had decided to try to build a new society, who had tried to live on the promises of God, they had a lot of questions. Why was this long-promised return so crummy? Why would God have given them one part of the promises and not all the rest? The people there proclaim solemn fasts, they devote themselves to praying in earnest, wrap themselves in sackcloth, smudge themselves with ashes, do all they can think of to get God's attention and get an answer to the question—hey! What about the rest of the promissory note? We've returned to the Holy City, but when is sorrowing and sighing going to flee away? Aren't we supposed to be the chosen people?

And now, dear beloved congregation, about a third of the way through this sermon, we have arrived at the beginning of the scripture reading.

And the prophet, speaking in the voice of God, absolutely lights into the people. If anything, the almighty seems kind of sarcastic—"to be sure, they seek me daily, eager to learn my ways as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness! Why, when we fast, do you not see?" This is a bit surprising coming from God. Normally, worshipping God is a good thing. Famously, God approves of being worshipped by the people of Israel, especially when it is to the exclusion of worshiping any other gods. And what the prophet says, it is something unexpected.

Is not this the fast I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to break every yoke of bondage, to share your bread with the hungry?

What we hear in the words of the prophet is a corrective. Because although the people had physically returned from exile under imperial oppression, they brought imperial oppression with them and recreated it themselves. The lowly had been oppressed in exile, and the lowly were oppressed in the Holy Land. The hungry had suffered in exile, and the hungry suffered in the Holy Land. The powerful lorded it over everyone in exile, and the powerful lorded it over everyone in the Holy Land. Because although the people had physically returned from exile under imperial oppression, they brought imperial oppression with them and recreated it themselves. And, unsurprisingly, a society built on domination of one group by another group would never be a place where people could thrive.

The words of the prophet were a corrective. The people of God were chosen not for special privileges but chosen for a godly way of life. And that means worshipping God, yes. And it also means that the common life of the people must be one of justice, of the sharing of power and not its hoarding, of the common enjoyment of the common good, of the protection of all and not merely safety for the strong. The whole people of God would thrive, when the welfare of the least and the left behind became the priority. And if they lived that way, the prophet says, then...then your light shall break forth like the dawn, your ancient ruins will be rebuilt, you shall raise up the foundation of many generations, you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

What we read in the prophet Isaiah, it was written with this time in mind—meaning that its message is eternal. Isaiah was written with this people in mind—meaning that its message is for all people who seek to draw close to God.

There is a message for us specifically, today specifically. Because today here in the Village of Oak Park we are celebrating Juneteenth. Juneteenth is the commemoration of General Order 3, issued by Major General Gordon Granger in Galveston, Texas, formally ending slavery in Texas on June 19, 1865. Had he known that this event would inaugurate a holiday sometimes called the second independence day, perhaps General Granger would have chosen a better name than General Order 3, but I digress. Juneteenth celebrates that slavery ended like a lightning bolt, like a thunder crash. Buuuuut, there was a problem. The end of slavery was met by a fierce backlash of anti-black terrorism passed by law and enforced by mob violence. Voting access was expanded so Black people could resist those laws. That was met by voter suppression and discriminatory gerrymander. You see where this is going? Jim Crow, redlining, mass incarceration, lending discrimination, on and on. Although the enslavement of Black people officially ended 158 years ago, the dominance of white people over Black people is recreated again and again. That structuring of power is still the same shape, though the tools of power change.

And just as the people of God would not be able to thrive as a nation until ALL the people of God were cared for, this nation will not be able to thrive until all its people are cared for. Repair of the harms done to Black people by society as a whole is necessary. A bone infection cannot be treated with a topical ointment, and the harms of a system of the dominance of white people over Black people cannot be solved with charity; it must be justice. The breaches must be repaired, the streets must be restored.

The whole of the people, the welfare of the least and the left behind. When this is the priority, the prophet says...then your light shall break forth like the dawn, your ancient ruins will be rebuilt, you shall raise up the foundation of many generations, you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. May this people of God find its role in that holy work. Amen.