

## “Can We Be Reconciled?: If Not Now...”

2 Corinthians 5:16-5:2

November 8, 2020

Fifteen years ago, Dr. Peter Storey, former United Methodist Bishop in Johannesburg and Soweto, preached the baccalaureate sermon for the graduating class of Duke Divinity School. I was still an undergraduate but was beginning to discern a call to ministry. I also knew a bit about Peter Storey, and so I snuck in the back of Duke Chapel to hear this man of courage and faith deliver this sermon. Bishop Storey was a leader in the faith-based opposition to the apartheid system and its oppressive policies, first as a pastor in Cape Town, then as chaplain to Nelson Mandela and other prisoners on Robben Island. The whole sermon was inspiring, but as long as I'm alive I will never forget Dr. Storey's piercing and powerful call to these seminary graduates as he closed. Here is what he said, with more than a little emotion: “until you lead your congregation to engage with the real world, your pastoring will be mere pampering – your proclamation will be a religious form of talking to yourself. You must resist with all your might the temptation to play ‘church’ while the world bleeds.”<sup>1</sup>

Playing church while the world bleeds. Failing to engage with the real world. Talking only to ourselves. I imagine we're all familiar with the temptations that Dr. Storey outlined. You don't have to look very far to see them lived out, and we can understand why. There is a comforting appeal to the understanding of the church as a retreat from the complexities and struggles of the world. There is safety to be found in insulating and isolating ourselves, or claiming exclusive rights to God's blessing. And this kind of sectarian withdrawal is right at home in the carved-up tribalism of our current cultural and political realities. The world is complicated and messy. It is tempting for us to tune in weekly, check the box, and pat ourselves on the back for being good people. Go through the motions. Play church while keeping the broken world at arm's length.

These temptations are not new to people of faith. The stories of scripture testify to that. Too often, I

think, we in the church turn the Bible into a kind of sentimental artifact, carefully preserving it in the parts of our lives that feel most spiritual and pure. Packing it in bubble wrap as a protection from the real world. The deeper truth is that these ancient words are also God's timeless word. They were built to last and designed for travel; they were spoken and written for communities of people who lived in the real world, no more pious or less fractured than the one in which we live. Take, for example, the words of the prophet Isaiah that we just heard. The people of God have finally come home from exile, returning to Judah and reestablishing their way of life. For a time, they honor the God who has brought them out of Babylon with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. For a time. But by the time the prophet speaks these words, the community has fallen into empty ritual, going through the motions but leaving their faith at the door of the sanctuary. It is worship without real-world consequences, ritual practices that do not evoke righteous living. The people of Judah are praying the prayers and singing the hymns and making a grand spectacle of their religious customs inside the temple and then they are accommodating injustice in the real world.

Well, the prophet can take no more. The hypocrisy of religious exhibition with no ethical consequence provokes these words of exasperated frustration. To those who had become comfortable with superficial, surface-level religion, the call is to deeper engagement with the world and care for those on the margins...stop playing church while the world bleeds.

The prophet Isaiah condemns the pietistic displays of the people of God. He urges them to cease and desist with their sinful oppressive ways. But that is not all and that is not enough. Here is how Bo Lim at Seattle Pacific University puts it, “Israel is to be an agent of liberation, generosity, and compassion for the poor and oppressed. Isaiah urges Israel, ‘pour yourself out for the hungry

and satisfy the desire of the afflicted.’ The phrase ‘pour yourself,’ literally means to ‘pour out your soul.’”<sup>ii</sup> When God’s people pour out their souls in love for others, the light will again shine and the ancient ruins will be rebuilt. It is a prophetic vision for the church’s place in the world.

Five centuries later, writing to a fledging community united by faith in Jesus Christ and frankly very little else, the Apostle Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to be agents of God’s reconciling love. Reconciliation. It’s an odd word to find in scripture. The Greek term, *katalasso*, comes not from the religious realm but from the world of politics. In that context, the term describes the new relationships that result from the resolution of disputes. This is precisely what Paul suggests has happened in Jesus Christ. There is a new creation, a new relationship, a new world of new possibilities. Believers have been given the invitation to begin again in their journey of life and faith. This is good news, to be sure, but the *astonishing* news comes next—in fact, the news is so astonishing that Paul repeats it twice. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Having been reconciled to God, we are now commanded to reconcile with one another. This message of reconciliation has been implanted in us so deeply and permanently that we must embody it—pour it out in love for one another *so that* God’s grace toward us is not in vain.

This is our call. This is precisely what it is going to take to live faithfully. We are called to pour out our souls in service to this God who intends to fix what is broken and to lift up those who are downtrodden. So much of faithful living can feel like minutiae. And then there are those moments when you pour out your soul in service of some greater purpose—when you stop playing church and start being the church. And I’m here to tell you that those moments make all the difference in the world. This *must* be one of those moments for us. This week, we have seen a stark reminder of what we all know from our own experience. We are a divided land. Disagreement has given way to distrust and even disgust, threatening to sever the bonds of commonality that have held us together. In such a time as this, that temptation to withdraw, turn away, hunker down, and retreat from the messiness of the world is great. It would be understandable. And it would be unfaithful. I am fully

persuaded that God calls us to more than this, that God equips us to be a community of reconciliation shining a light of hope and healing.

Though the phrase *tikkun olam* does not appear in scripture, it has been used often to describe the role of faith communities particularly in the prophetic texts. This Hebrew phrase literally means, “repairing the world” and was used by rabbis in the first and second centuries to describe the role of the faith community. *Tikkun olam* points to the notion that we bear responsibility not only for our own moral, spiritual, and material welfare but also for the welfare of our society at large, especially those who are in greatest need.

Repairing the world. Embodying the message of reconciliation. If this call feels overwhelming or intimidating...then you’re beginning to grasp its meaning! The work of justice, compassion, peace, and love is difficult in any age; and in our time of disconnection and division, it may be harder still. But the promise voiced by the prophet is true for us as well. Listen again. If you stop pointing fingers and speaking evil, if you offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted: then the Lord will guide you. God will satisfy your needs in parched places, make your bones strong, you shall be like a watered garden.

Isaiah says that God’s people will be called repairers of the breach. Paul says that we are to be ambassadors for Christ.

What if this was the animating force of the Christian movement? We repair what is broken. We restore community. We see the image of God and the spirit of Christ in all whom we encounter. We live not for ourselves, but for Christ. And they will know we belong to him by the way we love.

Both Isaiah and Paul urged courageous, compassionate, outward-looking faith in times of struggle and division. This morning, I want to make the same appeal in this *our* time, not the time we may have chosen but the time in which God has blessed us to live and move and have our being. The tears in the fabric meant to weave us together are legion. Distrust and division imperil every movement toward the common good that we might pursue. Threats of violence and lack of decency drive us further into fear and enmity.

This moment demands a courageous faith rooted not in human supremacy, but in the sovereign grace of Almighty God. Let that grace be the fuel for a movement of reconciliation, healing, and repair.

Early in the American experiment, the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville observed a presidential election in the United States and described it as a kind of sickness in which the body politic became dangerously feverish before gradually returning to normal. For a time, emotions ran too hot, and the fragile forms of consensus that were essential for democracy—what Tocqueville called our “habits of the heart”—evaporated. Vulnerable times. An uncertain future looming.

I’ve been thinking about this observation all week long. I’ve been praying that we might see a return to those habits of the heart in our common life. And then, in some sleepless hour between Friday night and Saturday morning, it occurred to me that we are the keeper of those habits, those values, those virtues. We who follow Jesus; we who ground ourselves in God’s grace; we who seek the Spirit’s guidance in our word and actions. We who have this charge to repair, heal, and reconcile. We who proclaim that every human face reflects God’s image and every human soul is precious in God’s sight. We who have been told to put away anger and bitterness and hostility. We who have been told to embrace God’s more excellent way of love. We who know the gift of honest confession and refreshing forgiveness. We who believe God grants fresh starts. We are the very ones who are most needed right now. As people of faith, we’ve got work to do. But please hear this: we are not alone. We are not alone.

The Prophet declares, “Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help and God will say, ‘Here I am.’”

The Apostle proclaims, “See, now is the acceptable time, see now is the day of salvation.”

For if not now, then when? If not us, then who? This is the moment we’ve been given. We are the ones for whom we’ve been waiting. And so, my friends, let us be

courageous. Let us be humble. Let us show a better way. Let us always resist the temptation to “play church” in the midst of a hurting world.

If there is to be a movement toward reconciliation,  
let it begin with us.

If there is to be a revival of compassion,  
let it begin with us

If there is to be a renewal of civility,  
let begin with us.

If there is to be a repairing of what is broken,  
let it begin with us.

If there is to be restoration of our streets,  
our relationships, and our hearts, and our land,  
let it begin with us.

Let it begin here. Let it begin now. Let it begin with us.

Let it begin. Let it begin. Let it begin.

---

<sup>i</sup> Bishop Peter Storey, “The Heart of Ministry”, May 2004.

<sup>ii</sup> Bo Lim, “Commentary on Isaiah 58:1-9a,” [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1946](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1946).