

When Scott asked me to preach on the relationship between faith and politics, I chose the title, “Building the Beloved Community” which you may recognize from the writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a phrase he used time and again for his vision of a more just, compassionate, and inclusive society, and it’s a term that the Wisconsin Council of Churches and some of our partners use for our work to promote racial equity.

And when I needed to come up with an appropriate scripture text, it didn’t take a whole lot of thought before I decided on the text we read this morning, the 58th chapter of Isaiah. It’s a classic text for the prophetic call to social justice. It covers some of the major problems we still wrestle with in politics today: hunger, homelessness, mistreatment of workers, violence and incivility.

But it’s not just the call to respond to this laundry list of social issues that makes this a compelling text. There is a depth to its understanding of the relationship between religion and community that resonates with King’s vision of the beloved community, and that can help guide us as we try to figure out the proper relationship between faith and politics in our own time.

The text is a fairly long one, but it has a simple pattern. I think the pattern can be described almost in medical terms: symptom, diagnosis, and cure.

The presenting symptom seems to be a pervasive dissatisfaction with the community’s experience of God:

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

There is a sense of spiritual emptiness, futility, and disappointment with the results of their religious observances. I think there is more at issue here than just that things aren’t going their way, that God isn’t answering their prayers for peace or prosperity. There seems to be feeling of a lack of connection with God, the absence of a living and enlivening relationship to the one whom they worship. A feeling that they are invisible, beneath God’s notice.

That’s the symptom – but what is the underlying reason for this spiritual malaise?

The diagnosis isn’t necessarily one that they or we might expect. The root cause is not anything distinctly “religious,” nothing that’s wrong with their words or their ceremonies as such. The source of the problem is something we might think of as “worldly” or “secular” – there’s something wrong with their everyday dealings with their fellow human beings. The root cause is injustice. They oppress their workers, they neglect the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the poor, and the afflicted. They slander and commit violence, they even turn away from members of their own families.

I don’t think it’s just a matter of hypocrisy or insincerity here, a simple mismatch between words and actions, saying one thing and doing something else. It’s not that they believe the right things about God and worship in the correct way, and then go out and behave badly. The point is that there is no true worship, there is no valid knowledge of God where there is no love of neighbor. Fundamentally, abusing and neglecting their neighbors is what is throwing their relationship to their Creator and Redeemer out of whack. And, deep down, they know it.

The prophet calls them to see what is in front of their own eyes:

Look! you serve your own interest on your fast day
and oppress all your workers.
Look! you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

And, he says to them: You **know** what is expected of you!

Isn't this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?^(E)

Isn't it to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

They *know* the answer. But it's hidden from them by their own self-deception, their image of themselves as good, pious people:

...day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God...

What then, is the cure? What is needed to restore the spiritual health of the community? What is needed for it to have a vital and life-giving relationship with the source of all goodness? The prophet is equally clear:

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. . .
[Then] The Lord will guide you continually . . .

When you feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

And religious practices like the sabbath will be revitalized and made meaningful again, not disregarded or made into a hollow sham.

if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests or pursuing your own affairs;
then you shall take delight in the Lord . . .

This is good news, not only for oppressed who are liberated or the poor who are fed, clothed, and housed, but for the whole community. The prophet proclaims the message of renewal and redemption even to the same people he is excoriating for their injustice and cheap religiosity:

. . . **your** light shall break forth like the dawn,
and **your** healing shall spring up quickly; . . .
. . . **your** light shall rise in the darkness
and **your** gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will . . . 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.

The prophet sees the possibility of the transformation of these rebellious and disobedient people:

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.

Isaiah 58 points us to a community free from oppression, a community bound together by respect for each other and care for the most vulnerable, a community in which justice is united with the true worship and knowledge of God. It is a vision of a community in which the love of God and the love of neighbor are inseparable.

I believe that this is what Martin Luther King was pointing us toward in his vision of the Beloved Community. In addressing injustice in the forms of racism and poverty, he adopted the confrontational tactics of resistance, protest and boycotts, but always according to a philosophy of love and nonviolence. The aim was to awaken moral shame in those who opposed civil rights, not in order to defeat or humiliate them, but to win their friendship and understanding. It was a strategy of practicing love and good will, even toward one's enemies. The ultimate goal was redemption and reconciliation for both the oppressed and the oppressor -- the creation of the beloved community.

Like the prophet's vision of redemption and restoration, King's vision of God's justice embraces the good of the whole community, not the triumph of one part of the community and the defeat of the other. As he wrote, every one of us has a stake in the struggle for justice:

We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.

We aren't there yet. In spite of the successes of the civil rights movement, the promise of the Beloved Community remains unfulfilled. Poverty and inequality, structural racism and white supremacy, the politics of contempt, the abuse of creation, are still very much with us. And these days, especially, the Beloved Community seems impossibly distant, that it's beyond our capabilities, that we will never get there.

But, in a real sense, it is not we who bring the Beloved Community into being. As Martin Luther King said, the love that is creative and redemptive in human society, that builds up and unites, is "an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of **God** working in [us]."

As we read elsewhere in the Bible, for example in the Psalms, it is **God**

who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

...

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

...

The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow [Ps 146]

We are called to join in God's ongoing work of sustaining, renewing, reconciling, and liberating. We are to watch for the signs of the Beloved Community wherever and whenever it may appear among us; and to nurture, defend, and participate in it. We are blessed and empowered to do so because we already **are God's** Beloved Community, because we – and that means **all** of us – are still and always God's beloved people, without exception, whatever our faults and failings, however enmeshed we are in the injustice and oppression of our own society.

When the community addressed by the prophet failed to be a nation that truly "practiced righteousness," God did not abandon them to their rebellion and sin, but called them back to what they ought to be with words of judgement and promise. They were still God's beloved people, and in their hearts, they knew what it would mean to reflect and embody that love as God's beloved community, in worship and in their dealings with their neighbors.

They might not recognize that they were "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality" with the oppressed and afflicted members of their society, but that was still the structure of their existence. They would flourish and thrive together -- or not at all. **Both** their life as a community **and** their worship would witness to God's promise of the Beloved Community -- or neither would. And that is true for us today as well.

Amen.