
RELIGIO AND THE BREACH
ISAIAH 58:9B-14, LUKE 13:10-17
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 21, 2022,
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I had a friend this week, who when reading my sermon title quickly, thought it said ‘*religio* and the beach.’ That might be a good summer sermon series for next year, but today, it’s about the breach, not the beach. The prophet Isaiah recognizes that there is a breach, which is why he offers that the people of Israel could potentially be ‘repairers of the breach.’ A breach is a breaking, a gap, a hole, a divide in something that was once whole.

Religio is the Latin word for religion. It is a part of Duke University’s motto—*eruditio et religio*. This is what Duke Chapel embodies, promotes, represents, and moderates on campus—*religio* at the heart of the university. The etymological roots of this word mean ‘to bind’ or ‘to tie together.’ This is what religious practice should be all about—binding us to God and to each other.

But what I find so interesting and concerning is how often *religio*--the religious, religious people, religious institutions--has not so often bound people together or bound people to God, but rather has divided and created a breach in human society. Just think of all of the long line of denominational splits because of differences. Christian writer and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner who died at the age of 96 years old this past week, put it this way in his book *Whistling in the Dark*:

“There are Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians. There are Presbyterians, Lutherans, Congregationalists. There are Disciples of Christ. There are Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are Moravians. There are Quakers. And that's only for starters. New denominations spring up. Old denominations split up and form new branches. The question is not, Are you a Baptist? but, What kind of a Baptist? It is not, Are you a member of the Presbyterian church? but Which Presbyterian church? A town with a population of less than five hundred may have churches of three or four denominations and none of them more than a quarter full on a good Sunday.

There are some genuine differences between them, of course. The methods of church government differ. They tend to worship in different forms all the way from chanting, incense, and saints' days to a service that is virtually indistinguishable from a New England town meeting with musical interludes. Some read the Bible more literally than others. If you examine the fine print, you may even come across some relatively minor theological differences among them, some stressing one aspect of the faith, some stressing others. But if you were to ask the average member of any congregation to explain those differences, you would be apt to be met with a long, unpregnant silence. By and large they all believe pretty much the same things and are confused about the same things and keep their fingers crossed during the same parts of the Nicene Creed.

However, it is not so much differences like these that keep the denominations apart as it is something more nearly approaching team spirit. Somebody from a long line of Congregationalists would no more consider crossing over to the Methodists than a Red Sox fan would consider rooting for the Mets. And even bricks and mortar have a lot to do with it. Your mother was married in this church building and so were you, and so was your oldest son. Your grandparents are buried in the cemetery just beyond the Sunday school wing. What on earth would ever persuade you to leave all that and join forces with the Lutherans in their building down the street? So what if neither of you can pay the minister more than a pittance and both of you have as hard a time getting more than thirty to fill the sanctuary built for two hundred as you do raising money to cover the annual heating bill?

All the duplication of effort and waste of human resources. All the confusion about what the church is, both within the ranks and without. All the counterproductive competition. All the unnecessarily empty pews and unnecessary expense. Then add to that picture the Roman Catholic Church, still more divided from the Protestant denominations than they are from each other, and by the time you're through, you don't know whether to burst into laughter or into tears.

When Jesus took the bread and said, "This is my body which is broken for you" (1 Corinthians 11:24), it's hard to believe that even in his wildest dreams he foresaw the tragic and ludicrous brokenness of the church as his body. There's no reason why everyone should be Christian in the same way and every reason to leave room for differences, but if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unite them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the church would look more like the Kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess."

That is the brilliance of Buechner. There is a breach within the church—ecclesial and theological tribalism.

But the breach is also outside the confines of the church and related to how people of faith live out their faith and embody a just and compassionate social ethic or not. Isaiah clues us in on his context when he uses "if." "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 your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.... If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day..." The "if" tells us that the verdict was still out on the people of Israel, that is, whether they would serve their own interests or serve others. In that larger biblical context, the people were engaging in the spiritual practice of fasting, but God still was not acting on their behalf—so they ask, "why do we fast but you do not see?" God does not see because God tells them that they've been serving their own interests and oppressing their workers and mistreating others. God then defines true fasting— to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke, to share bread with the hungry and house the homeless and to cover the naked. The breach created in that setting was the division between worship practices like fasting and an ethical, just life that serves those in need. The breach was between religious practice and human relations, between doctrine and discipleship, between worship and justice. The breach could only be repaired if they stopped the infatuation with a spiritual practice and fell in love with all of God's people.

And when Jesus heals the bent over woman, in Luke, and sets her free and she praises God, we see how a religious leader allows dogma or a strongly held belief or a particular scriptural interpretation to destroy compassion toward another human being. When a theology or religious practice or protocol is more important than the healing of another human being, *religio* is wrecked and squeezes out the lifeblood of our common humanity, no matter how holy we think we are. Over and over again, Jesus reveals how people are a priority over religious protocol or practice or theology. We may practice rightly in terms of doctrinal regulation or denominational polity, but our ethics can be all wrong when compassion and love are *in absentia* and we neglect what the Lord requires.

John Wesley reminds us of this in his sermon "The Way to the Kingdom": "For neither does religion consist in orthodoxy or right opinions; which, although they are not properly outward things, are not in the heart, but the understanding. A man may be orthodox in every point; he may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers...He may be almost as orthodox as the devil...and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart."

Our scriptures today are calling us back to the heart of *religio*. In both cases—Isaiah and Luke—we see how a certain understanding of *religio* or at least being right in your religious practice or belief according to tradition can be deemed more vital than human relationships, especially with those on the margins, and therefore distort what really matters in the life of faith. Christians can be more caught up in beliefs than demonstrating that all people belong to God. This crippled woman was deemed an outcast, an untouchable, but Jesus shows us that we should be more in love with people than with our religious practice or thinking. For him, it is about people over protocol or doctrine because the Word became flesh; it did not become dogma. That's the gospel and what *religio* truly is. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels [and even have season tickets to Duke Men's basketball games] but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Religio means 'to bind' or 'to tie together' so it should and can be a resource for repairing the breach, and not creating it. *Religio* is a binding to God and to one another. So when Jesus speaks to and touches the woman to heal her, he repairs the breach. He bridges the social, gender, and religious divide. He binds the woman in the love of God through his action. Jesus reveals that real *religio* is relational, human to human, which is why God became human in the first place, crossing all the bogus boundaries that we put up. Jesus breaks traditional religious protocol or enfleshes a

different scriptural interpretation because of this person in need, because of the rule of love. He shows us what true religion is.

Barbara Brown Taylor once said, “When my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor. That self-canceling feature of my religion is one of the things I like best about it. Jesus never commanded me to love my religion.” Love your neighbor as yourself. Our Christian religion, our *religio*, is actually about the bond of love that ties us all together in God who is love.

What breach needs to be repaired so that we might rediscover what it means to follow Jesus on his way of wholeness and holiness? Jesus tells all disciples, “Follow me.” He didn’t say follow your theology or your politics or your church polity or your book club. He said, “Follow me.” Follow a person, God in the flesh, not even a religion or a denominational governing board or a knitting club. This is why former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass could say, “Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference.” Why? Because the Christianity of this land breaks, divides, destroys while the Christianity of Christ, who Jesus was and is, binds, ties, bridges, heals, and loves.

Jesus didn’t wait for me to be perfect in every way but rather looked beyond my faults, my affiliations, my affinities, my shortcomings and imperfections, and saw my need. And we are called to do the same. See the human need around you and aim to repair the breach. Work toward actually living the great commandment of love.

The loudest voices in our society can often be the most loveless. There is a big breach in our land but *religio* in the Spirit of Jesus can help us repair and restore and heal. Buechner also wrote, "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing." There is a breach for sure; we know that. But there is also a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.