

## Repairers of the Breach

Psalm 122

[Augsburg College Chapel, 29 March 2017]

*“Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together...For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.”*

“A city that is bound firmly together...” I wonder if any of us can imagine what such a place, such a city, such a country or world would look like today? The breach is wide. We hurl words at each other without any intent to unite. We claim our own facts. We have lost all sense of the true meaning of “conversation,” whose Latin root means both to talk with each other and to live with each other. Bound firmly together seems a far-fetched dream.

Our colleague, Harry Boyte and his partner Marie-Louise Strom, have recently challenged all us – citizens, people of faith, people who believe in education for democracy – in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “You will rebuild the ancient ruins...You will be called the repairer of the breach” (Isaiah 58:12). To rebuild the ruins, to repair the breach, they argue, we must seek to navigate the Manichaean divide that polarizes and paralyzes our common lives. We must seek to find the words and actions that, while recognizing our differences, allow us to negotiate a way forward together.

I am a long-time student of a sociologist named Robert Bellah, who, with a group of colleagues, published an influential book back in the early 1980s titled *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. It is a compelling book for those of us who care about the social fabric of our country and who, at the same time, believe that we are called by God to be of service in the world.

Bellah’s most significant point in the book is that contemporary Americans have a first language that is very much focused on our individual lives and especially our economic well-being. When we talk about what we do and why we do it, we tend to talk about how it helps me rather than how it helps the wider community. Even our best work – our most faithful service – tends to be described in language that is individualistic. Bellah argues that this first language is impoverished – it leads to the breach. He then points out that we also have second languages – many of which are religious and theological – that have shaped our country and our experience, and that we need to recover these second languages in order to more meaningfully describe our lives together – we might say, to repair the breach. Examples of this second language include words and concepts like covenant and stewardship and vocation – sound familiar?!

As I read our Psalm for this morning, I began to think about how Bellah’s challenge to recover second languages can be linked to the Biblical narrative. As people of faith, perhaps our primary task as repairers of the breach is to return to sacred texts that define a way of being and living that is life-giving and justice-focused – that leads us to watch for God’s work in the

world and how we are called to be co-creators of God's reign on earth. So here is my case study of recovering a language perhaps more adequate and faithful to our times – an old language, perhaps, but also a language that brings insight and clarity to our daily lives here at Augsburg.

If you pay attention to such things, you will know that the narrative of our Christian worship is very much linked to and based in the city of Jerusalem – the focus of Psalm 122. From the time that Jesus turns his ministry on the path to Jerusalem - to the grand entrance into the city with palms waving his way - to the tragic events of Holy Week, Jesus' last meal with his disciples, his arrest and appearances before the religious and secular leaders, culminating in his crucifixion on a hill just outside the city – to the experience of the empty tomb on Easter morning – to the appearances of the risen Christ to the faithful in upper rooms – to Christ's ascension – to the remarkable sending forth of the disciples to carry on ministry in Jesus' name on Pentecost – the city of Jerusalem is the backdrop and the context for this remarkable drama that we know as the heart of the gospel.

And it is striking to consider the dynamic that plays out in the sacred city. The city that calls strangers in. The city that welcomes with great pageantry. The city that is home to civic and religious leaders whose efforts often intersect and sometimes conflict. The city where feet are washed and bread is broken together. The city where disciples betray and deny their master. The city that crucifies its prophets. The city where redemption is glimpsed even when all seems lost. The city where friends huddle in fear, seeking evidence that their work is not in vain. The city that is the setting for remarkable diversity of language and culture. The city that sends its citizens forth to follow their calls of ministry and service in the world.

The city that is the place where both the worst and the best of human experience occur side by side. The city of paradox. The city that conspires and betrays and denies and crucifies – and the city that welcomes and aspires and redeems. The city – where God is present in the midst of all the paradox and messiness. “For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.”

This is Jerusalem, a city with abiding relevance to our lives of faith – a city of ancient and contemporary significance – and a city characterized by often messy intersections and tensions that illustrate for us the themes that play themselves each and every day right here in Cedar-Riverside and Minneapolis, in our city where we seek to be God's faithful people, where we are called to be repairers of the breach.

So what lessons might we take from Jerusalem that are of importance to our own lives at Augsburg here in Minneapolis? What is it about cities that we must understand as we seek to be God's faithful people in this place?

My first answer to that question is summed up in a familiar verse from the prophet Jeremiah: *But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare will you find your welfare.* (Jeremiah 29:7, RSV) The first thing we must

do is embrace our responsibility, our common calling to care for the city, to love the city and seek its welfare. This is such an interesting challenge in the history of Augsburg. A few years back, I worked with Auggie Juve Meza on an URGO project that explored the history of Augsburg's relationship to its place and its neighbors. One of the things that Juve learned in his project is that Augsburg had a difficult relationship with its urban location for a significant part of its history – at one time, we seriously considered moving the campus to Richfield – and even when that effort failed, it was 30 or 40 years before Professor Joel Torstenson and his colleagues developed a framework for Augsburg's role in the city that sought to embrace the city as our home, as the place where we are authentically engaged in our mission-based work – this year, in fact, we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that transformative shift in Augsburg's life in the city. It can be difficult to love Jerusalem or Minneapolis when they betray and crucify, when they are fearful and dangerous places – but love them we must, Jeremiah reminds us, if we are to do God's work and find our own welfare. We are called to love the city with all of its tensions and messiness – and therein we will find our own redemption.

My second point about cities is that we must be open to their remarkable otherness – the diversity of friends and strangers alike – if we are to do God's work here. The Psalmist reminds us that “the tribes go up” to Jerusalem and only then is it a city that “is bound firmly together.” I remember vividly one of my first forays into our neighborhood. I was shepherded through Cedar-Riverside by the legendary Mary Laurel True, whose cell phone number is on the walls of most Somali homes and businesses in our neighborhood – because they know she will help! Mary Laurel introduced me to good people whose lives and work intersects with the college. We sat in one of the mosques in the neighborhood and spoke with the elders about peace and the God of Abraham; about our lives here together in Cedar-Riverside; about our children and the aspirations we have that their lives will be meaningful and successful; about the world and how frightening it can be to live with strangers; about democracy and civil discourse. In other words, we spoke as fellow humans living together in the city. On Good Friday, Jesus died on the cross alongside common criminals – who, like all of us – have strayed from the path of righteousness and yet Jesus included them in his final prayers. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in Jerusalem, giving them the wisdom and skills to engage with strangers of many languages and cultures, to pray together in new and strange vocabularies. Today, we live alongside of immigrants from far and wide who share our fears and our aspirations. In our diversity, God is at work and we are called to love these friends and strangers with whom we live in the city.

Finally, I believe that those who are called to God's work in the city must learn from the work of the late Jane Jacobs, the legendary urban theorist, whose *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (originally published in 1961) was a clarion call to arms for all those who loved the diversity and energy of cities that was being ravaged by trends in architecture and city planning. One of Jacobs' main points was that the well-being of cities is defined primarily by common, ordinary things. Common things like sidewalks, parks, defined neighborhoods, and a diversity of architecture styles and buildings of different ages. These common, ordinary things, when thought about with the needs and aspirations of citizens in mind, will create healthy, sustainable and vital urban centers. It is not about spending a huge amount of money, she

warned, it is about “the innate abilities (of cities) for understanding, communicating, contriving and inventing what is required to combat their difficulties.” It is about pageantry and ritual, about the small denials and acts of kindness, about meeting in upper rooms to wash each other’s feet and break bread together, about the tensions of daily life where the religious and secular intersect and sometimes conflict, about talking with each other even when we don’t understand, about being sent forth to do God’s work even when it is not clear where the work will lead us. It is about, in other words, a reflective practice of city life – what we might call the genuine work of urban planning.

Jerusalem, Oh Jerusalem. We pray for your peace. Cedar-Riverside, Oh Cedar-Riverside. peace be within you. We are called to repair the breach, to stand with our neighbors, to embrace the diverse and ordinary and messy nature of our lives together. City of both the crucifixion and the resurrection. City of stranger and friend. City that calls us in and sends us forth. City that marks out our lives of faith now as it did millennia ago. City that reminds all of us that our welfare, our redemption, depends on how well we tend these sacred and holy streets and neighborhoods and neighbors. City that is our home – now and for life eternal. Thanks be to God. Amen.