

“Building New Foundations” by Rev. Eric Moeller

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Ruins. No foundations. Breach. Broken streets. These words from the closing verses of our passage today describe the situation that the Israelites find themselves in at the time of its writing. Isaiah 58 is part of what scholars refer to as Third Isaiah, that is it is the last of three sections, each having been written by a different prophet over a large span of time. Third Isaiah is written to the community following the experience of exile. Babylon had conquered Israel and took her most traditionally valued people into exile. Eventually, after roughly 60 years, the Persians would conquer the Babylonians and allow the exiles to return to Israel. They returned to a homeland of ruins in need of rebuilding, restoring, and repairing. Again, though, not everyone had been exiled, so they also returned to a new generation of people who had never left, though had remained oppressed themselves. Isaiah 58, then, is believed to have been written to a community of faith in conflict; conflict between those who remained and those who were returning; conflict of what constituted true worship of God, and conflict over how they might rebuild what they lost. Does that sound like a familiar situation?

We live in an era of unprecedented and rapid decline in organized religion. As far as Christianity, there is no segment that has remained unaffected by this decline. Mainline Protestant churches, such as St. Lucas UCC, have had sharp declines as a result. The rate of St. Lucas' decline is almost statistically average to what is happening in congregations all over the country. We are not unique in this in terms of the cultural context in which we live. However, while I believe it to be true that external forces beyond our control have had drastic affects upon St Lucas, I do believe there are internal issues of conflict that have exacerbated the issue. We are much like that conflicted, post-exilic, Israelite community looking at the ruins, trying to figure out how we got here, and what needs to be done to fix it; what needs to be done for our ruins to be rebuilt, for new foundations to be raised for future generations, for the restoration of the community we all love.

As we've been wondering these things, in the words of Isaiah that we heard today, we've also been pointing the finger and speaking evil, placing blame on individuals, groups, and pastors within the congregation, driving conflict that then drives people out of the church, even by its mere presence, sharpening the decline and making us incapable of building new foundations and rebuilding a healthy, vital church of Jesus Christ. I told you I was going to speak some difficult truths in love during our final moments together, and here is one; we all shoulder a bit of the blame, a bit of the responsibility, for the current state of the congregation, even if only by silent complicity and complacency. You know, Isaiah 58, especially the portion that wasn't read, is speaking against going through the motions of worship but never being transformed by worship; claiming to be in right relationship with God while perpetuating and maintaining harmful relationships with others. Maybe we've all got to confess that to some measure we've not been transformed by worship and have maintained or perpetuated harmful relationships with others. What God through the prophet gets around to saying in Isaiah 58, is that there is no right relationship with God, no true worship of God, without living in right relationship with one another. Herein lies the key to the transformation of our lives, our faith community, and even our participation in the transformation of the wider community and world. Isaiah 58 offers us hope, offers us a new way forward, in spite of our past.

The text contains two blocks of something like 'if-then' statements. God is speaking through the prophet with direction, telling the people that to become the renewed community they desired, and God desired, their worship needed to be embodied, lived out, in a new way, and the same is true for us. When we look at this text closely, we see that such renewal is far more dependent upon our action than God's; most of the action in this text is human action, and this means that the renewal we would seek is mostly in our hands, and the abundance promised is a natural consequence of our actions. So what are the actions required, according to the text?

The two blocks contain the following actions as life-giving acts of worship, the 'if' statements if you will: loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, breaking every yoke, sharing bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked, not hiding from your own kin, removing the yoke, the pointing of fingers and the speaking of evil, offering food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted.

Last week I used a spinning watch to talk about centripetal force and the way the Spirit pulls us inward to use our God-given gifts to build up the body in love so that it is equipped and bound in unity as it seeks to participate in God's work in the world. While centripetal force is at work, centrifugal force is also at work; these forces play at the same time.¹ So if I were to spin a bucket full of water around like I did the watch, which I won't do today for everyone's safety, it wouldn't spill, because the centrifugal force would move the water outward and keep it from spilling. In the same way, our gifts are propelled outward, as illustrated by this text. The force is so strong they cannot be pulled entirely inward.

There is a great deal packed into these 'if' statements, but what I think is important for us to highlight today is that they are actions that meet both long-term and short-term needs, or, in other terms, they cover actions both of social justice and charity, but they are all outward actions. There are comfortable ways of living out our worship in which we feed people and clothe them, which is necessary and good, and God calls us to use our gifts in such ways. This we would call charity. These are immediate needs that we can, and do, meet through charitable action. But there is a more uncomfortable way of living out our worship that this text calls us to, which is the way of asking why people are hungry, naked, unhoused, or otherwise afflicted and seeking to address the causes so every yoke is broken, never to be used again, and all people can flourish. This we would call social justice, and it is just as much a call of the Spirit as its counterpart charity. We are called, even commanded by God, to utilize our gifts, whatever they may be, including our power and privilege, to address our internal and social sins and the way we structure our common life that presently benefits some while its deadly to others. We cannot, according to this text, hide from our kindred, no matter their class, race, nation of origin, sexuality, identity, abilities, age, appearance, or any other reason. It is our God-given command to see to the well-being of God's beloved people, and the whole of God's beloved creation. This, it seems, is a major point of conflict in this congregation. Some of you likely cringed at what I just said because you deem it too political and beyond the scope of our faith and how God would have us live out our faith, while others of you took comfort in it because it was

¹ Johannes Blauw shared the concept of mission as centripetal and centrifugal force in his work *The Missional Nature of the Church* published by the World Council of Churches in 1962. He himself was the secretary of the Netherlands Missionary Council.

precisely what you needed to hear today, and the kind of word you've come to St. Lucas seeking. The text describes both the comfortable and the uncomfortable as necessary for a community of God to flourish. Can you make room for both the comfortable and uncomfortable to be proclaimed and lived out at St. Lucas UCC, both from the pulpit and in other areas of congregational life? This will be a central question for you to figure out in the days ahead. This also leads to a second question that the text begs of us: what is the purpose of worship itself?

Isaiah 58 is all about worship and what its very purpose is. One view of worship is that by showing up and going through the actions we are pleasing God, and this text speaks quite staunchly against that. What the text seeks to share is that our presence in worship means nothing to God if the way we live our lives is unaffected by our presence here. I think most of us would agree that our worship here in this place, the reason we show up, is to be shaped and formed by God, is to shape our actions, and this is also a time during which we call to God for a variety of reasons and we seek guidance for our lives. While there is, as the text shows, a social or communal aspect to the purpose of worship, there is also a personal aspect. Worship is, in part, about us as individuals connecting with God, the Divine Reality, being shaped by the Spirit, and being guided in God's paths as we navigate our lives and the sharing of our multitude of gifts. You see, God calls us to be the kind of community that is both pietistic and missional; this is both about meeting our internal spiritual needs, and meeting the wider needs of the afflicted in our community and the wider world. Can St. Lucas UCC be a place where both happen? This is true worship; not to gather in a building on a Saturday night or Sunday morning just to walk away feeling good, but to gather and connect with God and one another in such a way that you leave the building a different person and never cease your worship in any moment of your living, but with every word and every action, you are living in such a way that you are transforming lives, breaking yokes and meeting the needs of the afflicted. Can you be that church? If you can be that church, and I know you can, here is what lies in store...we've gone over the 'if' statements, so here are the 'then' statements.

If you can be a church that is willing to be the hands and feet of Christ, engaging in the short and long-term needs of God's beloved creation, engaging in the work of social justice and charity, and you are willing to meet the spiritual needs of the congregation in individual and communal ways, then:

your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing, your healing, shall spring up quickly; your vindicator^[a] shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. God will surround you, in other words. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am. Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and 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. Your 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.

Wow. St. Lucas UCC I think the possibilities for you are truly endless. My hopes for you are endless. My goodness, you already are doing a great deal of what the prophet describes. I think your light is peaking through the darkness. You are feeding and clothing people, and providing space for people to worship and call upon God, and doing your best to care for creation as a congregation. My question for you, though, is will you be a space that seeks to

fully meet the needs of the afflicted, both within and without your walls? Will you be a place that seeks to meet the spiritual and physical needs of its members but never hides from the needs of your kindred in the community and wider world? You have the capacity to share your gifts, in their full variety, including your power and privilege, with the wider world in such a way that it is transformative both for you and the wider community and world, but you must decide, definitively, to do so. You must set aside the conflicts that are rooted around the desire of some to do so. If you follow the guidance of the prophet Isaiah as depicted in Isaiah 58, you shall be a vital, healthy, vessel of God's life-giving movement, though things will look different than before. Being a vital, healthy vessel of God's life-giving movement in this day and age may not mean you have huge numbers as you once did, but it will mean having a life-giving impact tending to the needs of the congregation and the needs of the afflicted in personal and social ways, and you have the capacity to do so if you so choose. If you wish to have your ruins rebuilt, and to lay foundations for new generations to build upon; if you want to be like a watered garden whose waters never fail, a place that is overflowing with budding, blooming life, you must be an Isaiah 58 congregation that keeps righteousness as its goal, righteousness being right relationship with one another, the wider community and world, and thus, God. If you wish to experience healing and abundant life within this congregation, you must make room for both meeting your internal spiritual needs and taking the Spirit-fueled, charitable, and justice-minded missional actions that presently exist, and seek to exist more fully in the life of St. Lucas UCC. Speaking as a millennial reading this text, a member of a generation that has all but fled Christianity, and having served this congregation, I believe this to be the life-giving, foundation-building way forward. The choice is yours, St. Lucas. The path lies before you and I believe God is calling you to take these steps toward rebuilding that you may live out God's purposes of compassion, justice, love, and comprehensive well-being and be a beacon of hope and light that I know you can be. So, St. Lucas, please, let your light shine.