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Rebuilding The Village

Rev. Dr. Kimberly Heath

Wall Street United Church

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out; do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet 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; they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not 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? Is it not 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?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, “Here I am.”

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. 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 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.

Rebuilding the Village

“The Anti-Social Century.” That’s the cover story of last month’s Atlantic magazine—written by Derek Thompson. It speaks to the incredible disconnection of these times.

We've talked about the loneliness epidemic, but one of the things they are discovering is that humans are moving beyond loneliness. Loneliness is a natural response that prompts us to connect. We feel lonely and sad, and so we follow that cue and do something about it and reach out. But increasingly people are not feeling lonely, and they are disconnecting even more.

The article talked about how we have 'spheres of connection'. There is the intimate connection of family or close friends. That has taken a hit, but it's still there. At a larger level there is the tribe — a larger group that we have affinity with. We are connected because we agree with each other on topics.

The sphere of the tribe has hugely strengthened, mostly on and because of social media. Social media has been great at creating tribes. On the one hand this has been good. Think of the 2SLGBTQ teen in a small conservative community who is able to connect to their tribe — to people who "get" them on social media. The bad side is that we are increasingly siloed, where we don't hear voices except the voices we like and agree with.

So, you've got the intimate connection of family and friends, and you've got the larger tribe of like-minded people in terms of big affinities. Thompson pointed out that increasingly we are losing the middle sphere, the village.

The village is that middle space between home and larger tribe. It's the space of acquaintances. It's where you go to the grocery store and engage in chitchat with the cashier you've known for 7 years. It's the PTA at school or the folks volunteering at the Food Bank. It's the church.

The village, he points out, is where humans learn kindness and tolerance. How does that happen? It happens because inevitably in the village — in the grocery store, at the PTA meeting, in church — you have to connect, interact with people you don't agree with — people who are different from you, people who are annoying (and to whom you are annoying!). But with time we learn to respect the differences and care about those who are different from us.

But increasingly we aren't going to the village to shop, to eat, to connect. We purchase things online and they come to our door. People prefer take-out to sitting in. That's not just an expense thing and it's not just a health thing. Some people, particularly people with disabilities, struggle to get out in winter. Our Sunday Supper people have noticed a new trend of a huge number of people wanting to just pick up their meal and eat it at home. This isn't just here. It's part of a larger trend.

And Thompson says: *"All of this time alone, at home, on the phone, is not just affecting us as individuals. It's making society weaker, meaner, and more delusional."*

Isaiah was critical of society and the people of his time. They didn't seem to care about others. They were going through the motions of worshiping God and in return were expecting God to bless them and do good things for them. *"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"*

But through the prophet, God points out their hypocrisy. Their faith was self-centred and only skin deep.

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers.

You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ...

*Is not 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?*

At the heart of what God wants is a deeper faith — one that extends beyond the individual. God wants a faith that results in justice, restoration and reparation.

We've been doing a series on the 12 Steps of AA, or as some call them the 12 Steps of Recovery. This week we are going back to the steps that we will call the "Make Up" steps. In my doctoral work I called them the Repair steps, that have us making amends for what we have done wrong.

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

I think these are *the* hardest parts of the 12 steps. It's incredibly rare to see this in action in the world. How often do you see people or institutions willingly making up for the wrong they have done? The place we tend to see it is when it is mandated by a court of law. How many times have you had someone come up to you apologize for how they behaved and tell you they are going to make it right?

Making a list of people we have harmed is the exact opposite of what our ego wants to do. We want to make and keep and memorize a list of people who have harmed us. Sometimes it's like our hamster-wheel brain wants to make a kind of prayer beads where each bead represented a hurt and injury from someone, and we can just go around and around the beads recalling and remembering.

My experience is that those who are in programs of Recovery often have more trauma, more pain and injustice in their past than others, and some incredible scars from earlier in life. So it seems a bit funny that the steps go in this direction — putting the onus on *them* to repair when they've been so hurt. Why not just jump from step 4-7 to step 10? From the steps of admitting and confessing to God to step 10 where we continue to take a regular self-monitoring? Why those 'make up' steps?

2 reasons. The first is that like it or not, your actions have *consequences*. You may not have intended to hurt someone — but as I preached last week, growing up involves taking responsibility for your part.

The second critical reason for taking this very difficult step is that it breaks the cycle of pain. The odds are good that when you look at your list of people you have harmed that they might be partly responsible for whatever happened. That's the hard thing about apologizing. We always want to add a "but." "*I'm sorry for losing my temper, but when you said this, it triggered me.*" We apologize but feel compelled to justify why we got angry (or why we're still actually right), and we blame the other person or we put the blame on something outside ourselves. There probably are a bunch of reasons you messed up! If the hurt you caused or received was with someone you are in a relationship with, it's going to be complicated. It's rarely going to be totally your fault or totally their fault. This step calls us to break the cycle by apologizing anyway. By taking ownership for what *is* your fault. It's not easy. If you need to eat a slice of humble pie before (probably the whole pie!)—do it. Break the cycle and make it right so that anger, violence, and injustice don't continue to spiral in you and beyond you to the other person.

As those who follow Jesus, as those who read the scriptures and see in them the ways of life, we are called to be repairers of the breach. Restorers of streets to live in.

Here's the thing. God wants us not just to make up for the harm *we* are responsible for, God wants us to repair the hurts that *others* have caused. I think for Canadians the best example of this is reparations to Indigenous peoples for the harms done to them through Residential Schools and through the Sixties Scoop and other systemic abuses that continue today. I have several times heard someone say "I had nothing to do with the Residential School system, I wasn't even alive then! Why should I have to pay for reparations?"

I am so glad that in Manitoba they are doing the search in the landfill for the remains of Mercedes Myran and Morgan Harris. It was a very costly thing to do with no guarantees — though there was very strong evidence to indicate that's where the remains would be found. In fact yesterday it was announced that they found the remains of Morgan

Harris and they have other remains that they are still waiting on the results for. Interestingly in the wake of this the interim leader of Manitoba's Progressive Conservatives apologized Wednesday to the families of two slain First Nations women after refusing to search a landfill for their remains. The Interim leader said: *"We lost our way in regards to empathy and also lost our way in regards to closure being brought forward to the families of the victims. We will ... be better as a party moving forward."*

But making amends is not just with words but by actions that show you will make things right. Sometimes these actions go far beyond anything you caused. I think of Bill Hayden, who is celebrating a birthday today. I think of how he started a treatment home for women here in Brockville. There was already a home for men seeking recovery from alcohol and drugs, but Bill saw the need and built a place where women could receive healing and freedom from addiction, and so found the funding to create Tennant House.

These actions bring healing not just to an individual but to villages and communities.

"When you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking evil against one another, when you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the need of the oppressed, then your light will shine in the darkness and your gloom be like the noon day. The Lord will satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. 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."

At the beginning of this message, I talked about the Anti-Social society we are living in and the loss of the village. Here's the thing. Relationships matter to God. Right relationships matter to God. How we treat one another in small one-on-one ways and in bigger societal ways makes a difference.

I want to encourage you to continue to connect in the village. Talk to your neighbours. If you are able, come to church; join the Pickle Ball group; eat Sunday Supper at a table in the gym. None of these groups and people who make up the groups are perfect. In fact, I guarantee that if you stick around long enough to get to know some folks you'll get annoyed — be offended or cause someone offence. That's part of life in the village. Learning how to accept differences and to apologize when we are a jerk helps us to be kinder to those who are not in our Tribe.

The wonderful thing about the village is that you get to know people who are different from you. The local Imam, Ahmad Khadra, has been in Brockville for decades, but I only got to know him in 2016-17 with the Syrian civil war and the refugee crisis. We came

together with others in the community to bring several refugee families to Canada. It was such an incredible community effort! This community changed because of it. Now when I read news of Syria, it's not just a distant place. The situation has a face and names. The same is true of the Ukraine. Because we have Ukrainians in our church and in the community, when we hear news it's not just over there. It affects us *here*, because that crisis and horror has a face. The same is true for Afghanistan, Gaza, the Ivory Coast. I pray the same for people in the US. Yes, we must protest and stand up because there's no way we are becoming American! But my guess is we all have American friends. Don't lose those friendships. Don't forget the humanity. Don't lose who we are as Canadians! We are people who care not just about ourselves in some protectionist extreme way. We need to continue to hold onto our values — and for us as Christians, those values go deeper than nationalism. They go to the heart of what we believe: that caring about others brings life.

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. This is who God is. God is creator. God is restorer. When Jesus walked the earth his first sermon was

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Jesus wants to repair your life, to give you healing, freedom from fear, freedom from addiction, *life*. Once you start on that journey, God's Spirit enters in and gives us the strength to do the same for others.

This Lent, give up fear. Let your faith move from the surface and go deeper to a place of life — life for you and life for others far beyond you.

May we raise up the foundations of many generations; may we be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.