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Lover's Quarrel
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Isaiah 10:1-4; Luke 5:27-32

You've maybe heard the phrase before: the preacher's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I'm not sure I like the phrase, and frankly it's not good PR. This is the place where the good news of Jesus Christ should be preached to all people- to my knowledge, afflicting people has never been on the agenda. But, I admit, I understand where the phrase is coming from. It is the preacher's job to make sense of the complexities within scripture- to lift out what is challenging, troubling, even, and then reveal the ultimate truth of the story, which is that God's love is always at the center, even if it seems buried in the shadows of a dark text. But, it's not my job to afflict you, that I know for sure.

Maybe it is my job to afflict myself; to discover how the Bible makes me uncomfortable sometimes, and then check in with you to see if we're on the same page. It seems to me this preaching gig is less of a lecture that seeks to afflict you or comfort you, and more of a dialogue that should engage all of our hearts with God's word. To be sure, it's difficult to have a conversation with this many people in one room, but just because I'm standing up a few feet higher than you, doesn't mean we aren't just figuring this out together. I don't necessarily have right answers. But, like you, I have thoughts, questions, reactions to what God says and what it means for us today.

I come here, too, because, despite how comfortable I am, I still need to hear the good news of the Gospel. But good news is not always comfort. I need the Gospel to give me a framework for how to think about and serve a world where affliction is rampant, and the news we hear and read about is often not good. The Gospel should surprise us, challenge all of our assumptions, and help us make meaning, find purpose, and push past cynicism. That's what is good about the Gospel. Afflicting the comfortable, I think those are words for the church of the 20th Century, or maybe they should have been let go before then. The church with Open Doors and an Open Future exists not to come down on anyone, but to be a community where we explore the nuances of being followers of Jesus Christ in the 21st century and beyond.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately, mostly because I work with young adults and I care a lot about how we interpret Christianity to them, and how they will carry the church into the future. But also my sister was recently in town, and since we are both pastor's kids we usually end up talking about church- we really know how to have a good time in my family. It is, of course, my not-so-subtle goal to try and quote at least one millennial in every sermon, and since my sister is not timid in her feedback, I figured I'd ask her perspective on what I should be preaching about. My sister Lizzy is not a pastor- she moved to Seattle and became a health economist, currently working on her PhD. She's not only a west coast millennial, she's an academic, and likes to poke holes in arguments. She could critique something until the cows come home, so I knew engaging her in this conversation was going to push me out of my comfort zone. I decided to ask her to help me in picking my scripture texts, too, and not surprisingly we came up with these two passages- both of which got her excited because they seemed controversial. Both of which made me nervous because... they seemed controversial. And it's true that, for whatever reason you want to infer, neither of the texts we read today, from Isaiah or Luke, appear anywhere in the Sunday lectionary. Westminster does not follow a set series of readings for Sunday mornings, like the

lectionary, but if you attend almost any other church regularly, you will likely never hear the scripture you heard today.

The passage from Isaiah is obviously challenging, especially given that many of us will connect the message to the fraught political climate of our day. But, I was reminded of worship professor, John Whitvliet's words about using only the 'easy' texts in Isaiah. He writes that "even when our worship services are filled with the best poetry Isaiah has to offer, they are often more like the art of Thomas Kinkade than that of Rembrandt: all light, no shadows." My sister, like many of our young adults, or those who are new to church in general, are yearning to know what our faith has to say about these gritty pieces of scripture, and, even more so, how the church can use them to speak in a more meaningful, authentic way about the dark and confusing things happening in our world.

So, okay, Lizzy. Challenge accepted.

The two passages, side by side, from Isaiah and Luke, seem to convey a relatively similar message, though they are separated by hundreds of years in their history. Isaiah speaks a word of judgment to certain scribes, who have written laws that continue to oppress the poor, the widows and the orphans, and protect the established members of society. Isaiah's Israel was a kinship society where money was not exchanged. Widows and orphans were those who didn't fit neatly into extended, patriarchal families that cared for one another, so finding resources to house and feed them when their husbands or parents died, either did not exist or were scarce. Laws to carve out space for them in an ordered world, were the only way they would thrive. The words Isaiah uses against these scribes are harsh, but fairly straightforward, and common among the prophets- they describe what the eventual consequences will be for behavior that continues as it is in the present. The Common English Translation says it like this:

What will you do when disaster comes from far away?

To whom will you flee for help;
where will you stash your wealth?
How will you avoid crouching among the prisoners
and falling among the slain?

In the reading from Luke, the overall message is somewhat the same—calling sinners to repentance. But, if we pay close attention there is a slight twist. In the story it says that, after recruiting Levi, a tax collector, Jesus joins him at his house to have dinner with Levi's former colleagues— the other tax collectors. In first century Israel, tax collectors were despised because they would defraud the poor, and pilfer money for themselves, while aiding the harsh Roman Empire. The Pharisees, who were strictly religious, Jewish leaders, began to whisper to the disciples behind Jesus' back, complaining that Jesus was hanging out with these sinners who mistreated the poor. Jesus must have overheard them talking, and in what seems like a rather loaded comment Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." It occurs to me that Jesus was probably calling both the tax collectors and the Pharisees sinners, because there really are no righteous people in this story. The so-called righteous folks were finger-wagging Pharisees who could not see beyond the surface of what Jesus was doing. Jesus' method was a different way of being a prophet, one that sought to build a relationship with those whose moral compass had failed them, to try and change their minds. But, so convinced were the Pharisees in their interpretation of Jewish law, they could not imagine eating and conversing with sinners like Levi and his friends.

In the same way, if we approach scripture, using either of these passages or others, as a way to prove our own side of the argument we will always be in opposition with someone, afflicting them with our righteousness, and never making any headway in finding what good God might be doing right in front of us. Scripture should not be used as a method to prove

one's point about a subject, but a way for the good news of the Gospel to surprise even our own well held assumptions about justice.

I told my sister about one of my favorite metaphors from William Sloane Coffin, a well known social justice preacher who died not that long ago. The metaphor actually comes from a Robert Frost poem originally, but because I wasn't an English major I heard Coffin say it first. Coffin claimed he had a Lover's Quarrel with America, and preached often about patriotism. In his mind there were "three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones," he wrote, "are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with the world." God is the lover, and we are the beloved. That is the first and most important truth we can hold on to- you might even say it's the comforting part of this sermon. But, the word quarrel implies that this love is a two way street. God doesn't love us inconsequentially, or deny us love as a consequence. There is a relationship between lover and beloved, one that has expectations on both sides. And if we are God's people, as Coffin says, we are a reflection of this lover's quarrel- this is the kind of relationship we are to have with the world. To love it is to engage it, to be affected by it, to care for it. What I think is important for us as Christians, though, is that the quarrel is not about winning or losing an argument- it's a quarrel that spurs us toward working on our relationships, our place in the world in relationship to all people, and making sure that they are good, and honest, and, eventually, whole.

If we look back to Isaiah I think this is what the prophet is getting at. Isaiah was conveying a lover's quarrel; God's frustration with the people of Israel was out of love for them, love for those they were leaving behind, and the relationships that were all suffering because of it. God's quarrel was, and is about justice. And justice, in the biblical sense, is a social concept. As professor Rolf Jacobson writes, "It has to do with the order of society and how that order shapes or fails to shape human relationships with one another. A society that is 'more just' is one in which the social order allows

life to thrive... A society that is 'less just' is one in which the social order prevents life from thriving to a greater degree." As we read these difficult texts we know justice is sought after, but what we often fail to see is that relationships are at the core of God's work to bring it about. Love and relationships are the way to a justly ordered society where all people thrive, even when it comes through laws, or policy decisions. It's why Jesus sat and ate with sinners and, at the same time, corrected the righteousness of the pharisees. 'None of you are right,' he seemed to say, 'until you are willing to break bread together, to love one another, even in the midst of your quarrel.' God's justice does not come about by denigrating one side or the other. It may necessitate consequences and correction, but God's justice is always, ultimately, loving, relational, and restorative in its approach and culmination.

There are maybe some who will hear what I just said and think this sounds like a good idea, but that in the end it is naive, it's idealist- there is not one lens we can use to view the world that will help us all settle our quarrels and bring about justice, especially one as emotionally driven as love. Maybe it is naive. But, if we can't be idealists in church, where can we be? We have a God who died to show us how far love was willing to go. To be sure, there is a time and place for data and quantitative research, which can also help solve problems, as my sister likes to remind me, but we come to this place to imagine that with God all things are possible- that the affliction of the world will not win out, that God's justice will eventually inhabit all of our hearts, and the world will begin to turn. Until that day comes we return here to be reminded of the good news. We have a framework we are creating here, for a world that is coming into being out there. We are making meaning here, and dialoging here, so that we can lovingly quarrel with the world. And we also come here to remember that, while we are likely neither the tax collector nor the pharisee, God is still lovingly quarreling with us. And that is a good thing to remember, especially for those of us who think we have a lot of this justice stuff figured out.

I called my sister at this point in my thought process to check in with her and get her reaction. As someone who has not gone to church in a while, and who is an academic, I was at once hopeful and worried she was, somehow, going to see right through what I was saying. It turns out that isn't quite what happened. While we started out talking about two controversial texts that aimed to prove something about God, or justice, or something, we ended up having a conversation about preaching and church. Selfishly, I don't think I helped her reach any new conclusions about her dissertation, but she helped me figure out what it is, maybe, that millennials, or any person disenchanted with the world, or church, might be yearning for. She also helped me discern what I had been hungry for, too.

In general, there are any number of ways we can approach issues of injustice. Being good citizens, giving away money or time, using a good filter for investments, reading and staying up-to-date on all that is happening in the world, checking our privilege. I think I've done most of these things, myself, and while it is important work, I have to say that none of them has ever left me feeling remarkably hopeful about the state of justice in our world. And without hope, what is the motivator to continue in our pursuit? In his book, Healing the Heart of Democracy, author and speaker Parker Palmer writes this, "If you hold your knowledge of self and world wholeheartedly, your heart will at times get broken... What happens next in you and the world around you depends on how your heart breaks. If it breaks apart into a thousand pieces, the result may be anger, depression, and disengagement. If it breaks open into greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the result may be new life." Herein lies what we do here, particularly related to justice. All of us have the capacity to have our hearts broken, especially if we are paying attention to the world. But, it all depends on how they break. *Will we be overwhelmed, apathetic, angry, or cynical? Or will we come here, and find ways to move forward in hope?*

One of our young adults told me recently that the day after a tragic event happened in our country he went to work, heartbroken, and he and his co-workers cried together- they didn't know what else to do. He said he showed up here for worship at Westminster the next Sunday hoping someone would make sense of it for him. He said that's why he always comes.

Here's the thing- our hearts will break if we love the world as God loves the world. And there are a number of ways to handle it. But, in this place we have a way for them to break open and create new life. When we come here, we are not doing it alone. We have the hope and the call of one who loves us and is quarreling alongside of us, who is working to restore relationships. And we trust in the promise, that there will be a day when two sides understand each other, when we are all fully known, and quarrels will ultimately cease. This is why we come. This is why I am a minister. Not to afflict the comfortable. Maybe to comfort the afflicted. But, always, always, to engage in God's love and quarrel with the world- one that challenges assumptions, that builds a framework of meaning and purpose and hope, and constantly, little by little moves us toward justice. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rolf Jacobson, "The LORD is a God of justice" (Isaiah 30:18): The Prophetic Insistence on Justice in Social Context, *Word and World*

Parker Palmer, Healing the Heart of Democracy

William Sloane Coffin, Credo