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“Repairers of the Breach”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Isaiah 58:6-12

As we begin today, I invite you to join me as we journey back 100 years ago to Durham, NC in 1916. Imagine yourself on the corner lot where this sanctuary now stands, gazing out at the growing town. By 1916, Durham had grown to over 20,000 people.¹ Motor cars and horse-drawn carriages still shared mostly unpaved dusty and muddy roads.² Streetcars travelled in three different directions at Five Points, and the railway was a block off Main Street. Activity was primarily located downtown, especially along Parrish Street where white businesses lined the south block and black businesses lined the north block. And yet, “A person walking along residential streets would observe immediately that Durham was not yet a city,” writes James G. Leyburn, the son of one of our former pastors. “Scores of families kept chickens in the back yard; indeed, the crowing of roosters was as familiar an early morning sound as the factory and mill whistles summoning workers to the jobs. A number of families kept cows and found pasture for them in the city limits. Even pigs were raised by some residents.”³

But Durham was *becoming* a city with great speed. City leaders were proud of their municipal building, market house, three firehouses, public library and school buildings. FPC member and city leader, George Watts, had given generously to ensure the city had a hospital (though we must note that it only served whites).

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durham,_North_Carolina

² James G. Leyburn, *The Way We Lived: Durham, 1900-1920*, (Elliston, VA: Norcross House, Publishers, 1989)

³ Ibid.

Trinity College and Hayti were unique, thriving communities set apart from downtown, but still an important part of Durham's identity. Twenty churches dotted the town, led by Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, and "to be respectable meant to be a member of the Protestant Church."⁴

Worship back then would have looked a little different than it does today. Presbyterians, along with their Baptist and Methodist friends, were simple, "almost to the point of austerity, devoid of liturgical elaboration, and direct in address."⁵ The Minister and the choir did not wear robes, the congregation did not recite creeds or read prayers together. The service included three hymns, one passage of scripture, an anthem by the choir, a few prayers by the preacher (one would last for more than five minutes), and culminate with the sermon, which would go on for 30 minutes at a minimum.⁶ No church back then had air conditioning, so the windows were raised during the summer and fans were distributed. Services lasted at least an hour and a half with communion Sundays lasting even longer.

I could spend the entire sermon talking about what life was like in Durham in 1916. It's fascinating to me. And as you know, I have not even touched on numerous important subjects of the time. But this sermon is supposed to be about looking forward, as you may know. I started with a brief look back because I believe we are who we are today because of those early days which shaped us and formed us. I don't have to tell you how much things have changed over the past 100 years. You know. Those of you who are in your 80s and 90s know better than the rest of us as you have lived through radical change—civil rights, women's rights, homosexual rights, massive technological change, globalization, travel, communication—the changes have come so fast and furiously we often find it hard to keep up. Would the people of 1916 have been able to envision what the world would look like today? Would they have been able to envision what our congregation and our worship would look like today? Of course not. But the fact that they faithfully moved forward in the way they understood God to be calling them in the midst of their own rapid change and development shows that they trusted God and trusted that God would be the God of their future.

⁴ Leyburn, 144.

⁵ Ibid, 150

⁶ Ibid, 150-151

Many of you know that before I came to First Presbyterian, I was the organizing pastor of a new congregation in Chatham County. In January 2012, we dedicated our first sanctuary, a beautiful timber frame construction with wide, clear glass windows that looked out onto the forest on every side. As we raised money to build this building and worked on plans together with our architect, we often returned to the refrain of what we were doing for future generations of Presbyterians in that place. As we planned, we thought about, talked about, and even prayed for those people who would make their way to that church and find a community of faith, love, hope, and joy where they would be able to grow together and serve the community and the world around them. We planned and constructed a building that would be around for a long time and would serve the community of Chatham County as it grew and changed, even one that we could not fully envision but trusted to God's care.

In some ways, it is very different to serve a much older, established congregation, and in other ways, it is quite the same. We are connected to those visionary leaders of one hundred years ago who planned and built this gorgeous sanctuary that would serve generations to come just as my former congregation is connected to those who will celebrate their 100th anniversary in 2112.

As we, on this day of celebration, look forward, we have much to think about in terms of the role of the church in the community of today and tomorrow. As culture has changed, the role of the church has changed. Though it was once a foregone conclusion that any active member of the community would also be a part of a mainline congregation, today no such assumptions can be made. Most of us have seen the results of the surveys decrying the "rise of the nones" (the n-o-n-es). The number of those who claim to have no religious affiliation are growing faster than any other religious group. This causes many to despair, to cry out "Why do things have to change?! Why can't things be the way they used to be?"

But let's be honest. The "way things used to be" wasn't so great for everyone involved. Fifty to one-hundred years ago in most churches, blacks weren't allowed to worship with whites. In fact, 100 years ago many blacks in Durham worshipped in the afternoon on the Lord's Day, after they finished serving Sunday dinner to the white families that employed them as cooks. Fifty to one-hundred years ago in

most churches, women weren't allowed to lead or speak in church, and they could only teach children or other women. Fifty to one-hundred years ago, no gay person would have dreamed of coming out for they knew that it would mean becoming an instant outcast and reprobate. In light of these things, I would urge us to pause if we think back to the way things used to be with nostalgic longing. While certainly many good things were a part of these days gone by, for many they were not the utopia they are often made out to be. We should and do respect the past; we celebrate the good that has come from our past; we give thanks for the blessings of the past and we move forward as people of the future.

Today we start this process of looking forward in the midst of an uncertain religious climate. While this church is vital and vibrant in mission and ministry, many smaller, rural churches and even neglected urban ones are struggling to keep their doors open and cannot envision a future that is full of life. Many look at the religious statistics, the loss of millennials in our congregations, and the decline of the mainline church and blame technology, or secularism, or the rise of individualism, or globalization on this turn of events, and they despair. But despair has never been the right answer to any problem faced by an individual or a community, has it?

Some churches cling to their despair, cling to their past and slowly die away. The members of these churches would rather die than change. As we grieve the passing of these churches, we must remember that the church itself is not dying. Why do I believe this? Because the church is the Body of Christ and Christ is alive forever and ever.

That's the theology of it, but let me also share a few practical reasons why I believe this. To begin with, the white liberal protestant church is not the only church in the world! Christianity in the global south is exploding all over the place—South America, Africa, and Asia show growth rates that would make you swoon. I say this only to help us think beyond our own context and into the wider world and God's global community of faith—a community of many different cultures, languages, races and peoples.

Theologians, sociologists and community organizers know why the church is growing in these places. To begin with, it is because the people are thirsty for God. They need God and they need God desperately. I am not sure many upper-middle class white folk in the United States can articulate very clearly anymore a real and meaningful need for God. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist, but we have stressed our independence and self-sufficiency for so long, I don't know that we know what it really means to depend, body and soul, on our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The second reason why the church is growing in some places and not in others is because of vision. A church with a vision for the future and a belief that God is with them and doing new and amazing things will flourish—if not in numbers, then most certainly in joyful ministry. “Where there is no vision,” says the writer of the Proverbs, “the people perish.” When we cannot open our eyes to the full and bright future God has in store for us, we remain in darkness and despair, and we cannot move forward in the hope God intends for us.

First Presbyterian has a rich and faithful past. This community of faith has stood at the crossroads so many times when the culture around us was groaning with the pain of change and transition. Rather than putting on blinders, running to hide from difficult issues and cowering in fear of potential change, this church has stood solid in their faith as followers of Jesus Christ, stretching to see what God might be doing, pushing forward into new understandings of how God might be at work in this world and how grace might abound by the power of the Holy Spirit in our worship and service to the community.

I believe that First Presbyterian also has a rich and faithful future ahead. If I didn't, I wouldn't have signed on to journey with you! I believe that we are positioned in the midst of the city for a reason—to be a light to the city, to be a witness to God's amazing love and grace to all people, no matter race or creed, gender or age, sexual orientation or gender identity. You have embraced God's call to be this light in the city in the past, and I know you will continue to do so in even greater ways in the future.

When I interviewed with the Pastor Nominating Committee, they asked what drew me to First Presbyterian. I told them this: First Presbyterian is the church in, with

and for the city. The biggest issues to which the church needs to be responding today are the issues found so predominantly in the city—poverty, racial injustice, violence, and ecumenical and interfaith relations. We are called to mend these broken spaces, as Isaiah calls us to do—to repair the breach—the breach of justice which must be mended in order for the city to be whole and for all to be able to live in the light of love God intends for us. In this way, the church is no different today than it was over two thousand years ago in Isaiah’s time; it is no different today than it was one hundred years ago when Durham was growing and changing so rapidly. The church in this changing and growing city of Durham today, as the church of the past, is still called to love our neighbor as ourselves and to care particularly, as Isaiah makes clear, for the least of these among us—the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the oppressed and the victims of injustice. Isaiah makes clear that God wants us to be people of justice and righteousness “actively engaged in social and economic reform” and “agents of liberation, generosity, and compassion for the poor and oppressed (58:6-7).” This has not changed in all these years, and it will not change as we move forward into a future yet unknown to us. And the best news of all? We are not alone. We are partners with our sisters and brothers in this city and all around the world as we seek peace and pursue it together in God’s name. And God is with us. God is our light, our guide, and our endless stream of living water. May our next one hundred years as First Presbyterian Church in the city of Durham be as rich and transformative, faithful and just as the past one hundred years have been. Thanks be to God for this journey we are on together. May all we do give honor and glory to God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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