

## PROGRAM YEAR KICKOFF

### *Repairing the Breach*

Isaiah 58:9-14

September 8, 2024

Deep in rural Rowan County, North Carolina, ten miles northwest of the town of Salisbury, sits the community of Woodleaf, where the soil is as rich as brown sugar. This may be why Woodleaf is tomato country. Since the late 19th Century, when the Bailey brothers harvested their first crop, tomatoes have been a way of life in Woodleaf, North Carolina. This country crossroads was my first home. Unity Presbyterian Church, founded in 1788, my father's first call fresh out of seminary, brought our family there. The most controversial thing about the new pastor in 1980 was not his youth (barely 26 years old) or the fact that he came from up north in Pennsylvania. No, it was his distaste for tomatoes. The legend is that Dad once jokingly asked the church elders, "What are tomatoes good for, anyway?" One of the old farmers chuckled, "Well, now, tomatoes pay the preacher." Indeed.

We moved away when I was in fourth grade, but Woodleaf is on my mind these days. I read and hear about the collapse of community, the loss of belonging, institutions suffering from distrust and decline, relationships that have moved online and been transformed by the migration. Not for the better. Neighbors no longer know or look out for each other. And these statistics do underscore a certain reality, but they don't tell the story of every community. When I was a kid, Woodleaf was the kind of place where your neighbors knew your business and cared what happened to you, especially if you happened to be the preacher's kid and lived in the manse just down the hill from the church/community center. Nearly every single one of my elementary school teachers went to our church, which meant I saw them six days a week. Our elementary principal, Mr. Shytle, was the organist on Sunday mornings and one of the finest men I've ever

known. Against the odds in the digital age, Woodleaf has maintained this sense of community. In 2006, hoping to build a new fellowship hall, the congregation of Unity Presbyterian Church hosted a tomato festival as a fundraiser. Well, the building was built, paid for, and is used by the whole town. But nearly two decades later, the Woodleaf Tomato Festival continues. It has grown, expanded its reach, and become an anchor in the summer calendar for the whole region. Every August they gather—people who have left and people who will never leave—to celebrate the crop and the community with a parade, concerts, contests, and lots and lots of tomato mayonnaise sandwiches. They even invite the former preacher, now retired a couple hours away, previous tomato slights fully forgiven.

I've been asking myself: what is it that is so compelling about this annual gathering? Why do I tear up at even the thought of it?

And I think it has something to do with the longing for authentic community in a time defined by fracture. That's what's on this pastor's heart as we begin the program year at Second Church in the fall of 2024. I'm thinking about—I'm praying about—the faithful, gradual, communal work of healing our land. And so, we return to the 58th chapter of Isaiah and shift our focus from rebuilding to repairing.

Now, the call to repair presupposes that something is broken, so we should talk about that. Our congregation's elders and staff spent some time together last month contemplating the breaches we experience in our individual and collective lives. And you could add to our list, I'm sure, or make one of your own. It's no novel thought to suggest that we are polarized, calcified, divided, and disconnected. I am often guilty of fixing my

gaze on the gap. And so, it was striking at our session retreat when an elder in our congregation counseled a different approach. *We should focus more on the bridges than the breaches.* I think she's right.

In that spirit, let's start with these questions:  
 What kind of people do we want to become?  
 What kind of community do we want to build?  
 What kind of future do we want to plant and cultivate?

Now be advised that these questions are not rhetorical. In fact, they are unavoidable. We are answering them every single day in our actions, our inactions, our interactions. We are responding to them through the words we speak, the silence we keep, the decisions we make, and the ones we avoid.

In a time that feels so heavy, weighed down with anger, tension, and dissension, there is a pair of pressures pushing us to paradoxically polar positions. One is to disengage, to withdraw from it all entirely. Just a couple of weeks ago I had coffee with a member of our congregation who I think speaks for many of us when she says, "I wish I could just disappear until November 6th." I feel that.

The other impulse, just as strong for many of us, is not simply to engage but to be consumed, to invest all of our energy and all of our effort promoting our point of view or, more to the point, mounting a rhetorical attack against the opposition. To release our passion in the form of angry tirade or self-righteous polemic. Aware of this very human impulse, social media companies and political campaigns fuel the burning fire within us, knowing that enagement equals engagement. Our attention is the most valuable asset we control. They fight for every ounce of it. And so, I identify with a friend who told me this summer, "To be honest, Chris, I don't like who I become when I spend too much time online."

There's that question. The one that matters here. What kind of people do we want to become?

To my mind, the flaw in *both* disengagement *and* hyper-engagement is the same. Both strategies tend to magnify the breach and neglect the bridge.

Here's the context of the prophet Isaiah's words. God's people have returned from exile in Babylon and begun the long process of rebuilding from the ruins, recreating community. The prophet sees in the destruction an opportunity for a new beginning, a fresh start. He cries out to God's people, "We can do this differently!" We can construct pathways of understanding and compassion across the gulfs between us. We can pour ourselves out in service to God and each other. We can know our neighbors and their needs, reweaving the tattered strands of our communal fabric. We can repair what is broken if we *focus on the bridge and not the breach.*

The prophet's patient practice of compassion offers an alternative. Listen again to the conditional statements. If you quit pointing your fingers... If you stop speaking evil... If you offer food to the hungry... If you serve the needs of the suffering... **Then** God will guide you. **Then** God will satisfy your needs. **Then** your bones will be strong, and you shall be like a watered garden. Just right for growing the fruits of the spirit. If...**then** you will be called repairer of the breach.

Now, my sophisticated Second Church family, let us not make this more complicated or grandiose than it need be. Repair requires no dramatic display or intricate strategy. We do it stitch by stitch. One encounter at a time. Indeed, I am convinced this is the only way it happens. So, at the risk of sounding overly prescriptive (read: preachy), here are three threads that might be used to mend the tears:

First, **contribute constructively.** That's right. Before you hit send or post or dial, ask yourself this simple question: "Does what I am about to publish or share contribute in a meaningful way that adds to peace rather than ramping up fear and anxiety?" Not everything on your mind needs to be said. You are not required to attend every argument to which you are invited.

Second, **engage courageously and compassionately.** Often, when the choice is between angry words and measured silence, it is best to keep quiet. But not always. There are moments when we must speak, but

our faith would tell us that *how* we speak is just as important as *what* we say. It takes courage to engage in ways that may be uncomfortable, vulnerable. To separate people from perspective. To disagree without creating enemies. The apostle Paul writes, "Do not return anyone evil for evil." Did you know that you can be kind and gracious even when engaging someone who is not?

Third, **prioritize personal encounters.** Friends, perhaps most of all, I urge you to invest in authentic connections IRL (in real life). To seek out and intentionally make space for discussions across divisions that happen best in the physical world. In other words, spend more time at tomato festivals and less time in the comments section.

The prophet saw in the rubble, in the ruins, the possibility for a fresh start. In place of the brutality of Babylon, the prophet envisioned a community committed to compassion. The term that keeps coming to my mind these days is neighborliness. In the place of empire, Isaiah described a neighborhood, the kind of place where abundance is shared like homegrown tomatoes, where we look out for the vulnerable, where we build each other up, where we live in harmony. *Focus on the bridge, not the breach.*

What if *this* was the animating force of the Christian movement in our time? We see the image of God and the spirit of Christ in all whom we encounter. We do not live for ourselves, but for Christ. And they will know we belong to him by the way we love.

Oh yes, we are a divided land. The tears in the fabric meant to weave us together are legion. Distrust and disinformation peril every movement toward the common good we pursue. Disagreement gives way to disgust, threatening to sever the fragile bonds that have held us together. And yes, the next 58 days will test the strength of those ties. In such a time as this, temptations to either flee or fight will be great, but God calls us to more. To become people of hope and healing. To cultivate the virtues of neighborliness and compassion.

The prophet voices a promise, "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry out and God will say, 'Here I am.'"

And so, my friends, let us be courageous. Let us be gentle. Let us show a better way. The bridge, not the breach. With God's help, I still believe we can heal this land. Amen.