

Doing Our Part to Repair the Breach

A reflection on the 100th anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre

Isaiah 58:9-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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After the traumatic and devastating experience known as the Exile in Babylon, the prophet proclaims words of both hope and action to the Hebrew exiles, who will soon be returning home. "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" (Isaiah 58:12).

I strongly believe these are words of both hope and action are relevant and applicable to you and me, to us as a community of faith, upon the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Hence the title of this sermon, "Doing Our Part to Repair the Breach".

So, let's talk about breaches that need repairing. And I'd like to start that with a discussion about **earthquakes**. You may wonder what does a preacher know about earthquakes? Well, this one just happens to have a Bachelor of Science Degree in Geological Sciences from that often-disparaged (in Oklahoma) university located in Austin, Texas.

The thin veneer of solid material around our molten planet is called the crust. The crust is actually made up of several disconnected pieces, called tectonic plates. Some of these plates crash into each other in such a way that rock is forced upwards, like the uplift that is still creating the Himalayan Mountains. Some plates scrape by each other horizontally in opposite directions, like those creating the San Andreas Fault in California. Other plates actually pull apart and diverge from each other, with new crustal material being added, such as the Mid-Atlantic Ridge running the length of the Atlantic ocean. Finally, some of the plates actually crash into each other in such a way that one plate dives beneath the other, basically recycling itself back into the molten mantle. One example of this is happening near Japan.

Almost always the motion between these plates is very slow, yet still measurable. Sometimes, however, they can get stuck, with friction building and building to the point when in a matter of seconds or minutes there is a sudden release along a fault line that discharges enormous energy in ways that travel throughout the earth's crust, creating the shaking we feel, often accompanied by devastating destruction. The point is (and yes, I do have a point) **sudden massive earthquakes just don't happen out of nowhere. There are always underlying causes that build up over time, and if the pressure and friction are not dealt with, cataclysmic events occur.**

The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, using my geological analogy, was a massive earthquake of enormous tragedy and destruction that didn't just happen out of nowhere. It was an event preceded by attitudes and systems of ever-building friction. That friction, to be perfectly honest, was built upon by attitudes and laws that held (without acknowledgement) that all people are really *not* created equal. **Created**

equally in God's image is something our country has never lived into, and for many, including Christians, never believed it in the first place.

The massacre was a result, in part, of the **envy and jealousy of white people in this city toward the Black community whom they felt had risen above their station in life.** In this caste system, it took just one spark, a last straw, a trigger to set off the literal fires and destruction for the purpose of putting these colored folks back in what they considered to be their rightful place. That place? Somewhere down the ladder on a much lower rung.

Where did such attitudes come from in the first place? I stand here as a Christian pastor and preacher to declare that much of it came from within Christianity itself since the founding of our nation. In the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Massacre, there were reports of sermons that were preached on the following Sunday. I learned just over a week ago from the Rev. David Wiggs, current pastor of Boston Avenue United Methodist Church, that when that church was first located closer to downtown in 1921, the current Bishop of the area, Edwin D. Mouzon, decided he would come and provide the sermon that morning. Records indicate Bishop Mouzon declared from the pulpit (as did other pastors, and certainly city leaders, for that matter) that the colored people were wholly responsible for the horrors of the riot. "Bishop Mouzon went so far as to announce that W. E. B. DuBois' recent visit and talk to Tulsa Negroes was one of the contributing causes of the riot. He averred that **the Negro must not presume to compete with the white men nor seek to rise out of the economic and social situation in which the whites are determined to keep him.** A violation of this edict was sure to visit on the Negro the reprisals of race riots whenever it occurred."

This breach is one the Church, Christianity itself within this nation, has yet to fully face and come to terms. From a personal and profession standpoint, I must declare that I am not the same person I was a year ago, and that's in addition to the pandemic. A big part of my transformation was the result of immersing myself into the racial reckoning spurred on by the murder of George Floyd one year ago this past week, along with participating in the protests organized by the Black Lives Matter movement, and yes, the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre itself. After reading, engaging, and discussing over a dozen books this past year, and countless articles and posts, I have done a lot of **personal reflection**, the place where it must start for each and every one of us.

Here's some things I've learned from those books, and other encounters, like being an active member of the Presbyterian Synod of the Sun's Network for Dismantling Racism, that are impacting me personally, and now my ministry. I shared some of the following comments as part of the opening devotional at our weekly gathering of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery pastors just this past Tuesday afternoon.

The original sin of this country, before it was a nation, was not slavery itself, but the ingrained understanding that some people are inherently of higher worth, value, and simply superior to others. That hierarchy of superiority was primarily, and increasingly, based on the color of one's skin. That understanding, in many ways, is as alive today as it was 400 years ago. It led to the creation of racism as we know it, that whiteness was at the top rung of the ladder, and blackness was at the bottom. Hence, racist policies to keep whites on top and in power, thus becoming the overarching status quo in this country, were intentionally built into basically every structure of our society: politics, education, housing, banking, job opportunities, access to healthcare, etc. Denial of this is the heartbeat of racism, and yes, it still beats.

We've been deceived by a good/bad binary, that a person, or an entire people, are either one or the other. Since we see ourselves as good Christian people, we therefore can't be racist, especially not us woke progressives. Racists are bad people who say and do bad things to people of color. But yes, **we are good people. Yet, we participate in and benefit from a system that hurts and intentionally suppresses other people based simply by not being born white. That's called white privilege.** So now, after much internal reflection, many of us are now able to see ourselves as good white racists. Most likely, however, we prefer to simply consider ourselves as "not racist", or "colorblind", claims that signify neutrality.

In the bestselling 2019 book, "How To Be An Antiracist", which our own Book Study Group just finished discussing, author Ibram X. Kendi basically says that **"not racist" isn't a real thing.** He writes, "There is no neutrality in the racism struggle. **The opposite of "racist" isn't "not racist." It's "antiracist."** "One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist." **The very idea of being non-racist is designed to freeze us into inaction, to do nothing to actually eradicate racism. Thus, through our inaction racism becomes built into maintaining the status quo.** That includes our inaction, thus acceptance and complicity within Christianity.

The understanding of being *antiracist*, in contrast, is to actually take action to work to identify and dismantle racism. Kendi makes the point, **"We can be racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what – not who – we are."**

So, let's talk about our role, what I believe is our calling as College Hill, to put into action the prophet's declaration to **do our part to be repairers of the breach.** The word breach has a couple of different meanings. Perhaps most commonly, it means a gap or tear in something like a wall, or barrier, or defense. It implies that something is broken, ruptured, or torn. The Greenwood District did indeed suffer this kind of physical breach 100 years ago. A breach can also mean an act of violating or failing to observe a law, a code of conduct, even a trust. **The city leaders of Tulsa a century ago, among others including insurance companies, are indeed guilty of this kind of breach of the law and of trust.** This breach of trust still a gaping wide wound in our city today.

What many still have not come to realize is that these breaches, though a century old at this point, have never been fully repaired. And there are indeed many reasons for that. Reasons that we, as people of faith and fellow children of God, are being called to address in such a time and place as this. How can we help repair the breach if we don't face the truth, nor do anything to help in the repairing process? Notice my emphasis on the word 'repair'. **The act of making amends and repairing is the very definition of reparations.** Fact: No Black survivor or descendant has been justly compensated for their losses. No one was ever held accountable. That has left a gaping wound unhealed for a century – and that wound is still open on Tulsa's north side. Just imagine the generational wealth that was obliterated on May 31 and June 1, 1921. Think of how that changed the trajectory of countless lives.

Again, the question is: What can be done now to help heal those wounds? Unfortunately, we seem to be stuck again (perhaps like the friction and building pressure that can lead to an earthquake) when it comes to making amends and making right that which is wrong. Our own Session of Ruling Elders opened up a discussion about participating in financial reparations (including to survivors and their descendants) in our meeting earlier this month. We, like most everyone else it seems, are not of one mind. Neither is our city government, nor the Black community itself of

one mind when it comes to reparations and restitutions. But let's keep talking about it in the hopes of preventing another earthquake. Perhaps there is one thing we can all agree upon, **racial trauma is indeed real, and it is generational in nature.**

Now, here's another sticking point, another cause of friction. **We believe too easily that racial reconciliation is the goal, and that it may be achieved through a straightforward transaction: white confession in exchange for black forgiveness. Many, however, have stopped using the term reconciliation – for there was never any conciliation in the first place.** So, rather than using the term racial reconciliation – many are now using the term justice work that leads to **racial justice. Yes, it's all about justice!** It is a sad fact that we basically want to skip the hard process of true repentance. Repentance isn't just turning away from something, it's also a movement toward something else. **Confession is simply the first step,** though a very important one. Simply feeling sorry (or guilty) doesn't get any of us very far down the road to achieving racial justice. **We must find ways to engage in the actual work of restitution, which simply means restoring that which has been broken, injured, or taken away.** We must talk about it and then take action – individually and as a community of faith – in order to move forward.

How can we do our part to repair the breach? I'll close with the suggestions made this week in a pastoral letter by the Rev. Tim Blodgett, General Presbyter of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery.

"Pray. Confess. Learn. Change. Speak out. Show up. Be an ally and advocate. Peacefully protest. Commit to justice. Dismantle systems that oppress. Stop the killing. Love."

With God's strength and empowerment, may it be so.

Amen.

Resources:

Kerry Connelly, *Good White Racist?: Confronting Your Role In Racial Injustice*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2020.

Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, Simon & Schuster, 2020.

Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be An Antiracist*, One World, 2019.

Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, Random House, 2020.