

Finding Your True Identity in Christ, Pt. 7

Significantly Sent

Isaiah 58: 6-12

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Our hearts yearn every time we pass this house on Claycut and Glenmore. To Rhonda and me, it looks like an old Miami house, a house we would have seen in our growing up years. It sits on a beautiful lot. From a time when people had more yard and less house, when kids could play freely outside. And it looks like for decades it was an interesting place to live. I love the arched window and the columned porch. It has sat empty now for at least five years. For sale but not bought. Then maybe bought, but never touched. We yearn towards it. We want to restore it. To make it beautiful again. To gather it up and care for it that a house from an earlier time might speak to us of smaller scales and old-fashioned elegance. But restoration is hard work. Risky work. Expensive work. Would it be worth what it would cost? Would anyone want to buy a house more suited to another time, even if it was shiny again? And the time to oversee the work, would that be worth it? Restoration is harder than tearing down and building new.

I often wonder why God puts up with the world. Why does he put up with me? Why not just wipe out this world and make a new one? Why not just send corrupt, broken, hurting, violent, twisted human beings into nonexistence? Start over with creatures who do what is right. But he doesn't. Our God loves the world he made. He loves the creatures he made in his image. And his plan is to restore us, not destroy us. Even the final vision of Revelation is of a new earth, not replacing this one, but coming down from heaven into this world. Renewal of the original is God's plan. He loves the original design. He doesn't want to get rid of it but to fix it. And us. From the inside out. And he wants us, us! to participate in his work of restoration.

Let's go all the way back to the beginning.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over . . . all the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them. And God blessed

them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1: 26-28).

There’s so much in this extraordinary passage! First, how wild is that sentence: “And God said, ‘Let *us* make man in *our* image’” The one God is speaking. But he’s speaking in the plural. As if God is a “we.” Who’s the *us* in God? Centuries and centuries later, the apostle John would speak the most extraordinary three word sentence ever spoken about God in the history of the world. *God is love*. God *is* love. Love means relationship. Out of love comes life. So John would explain, “In this the love of God [became clear], that God sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him.” The one God is the Father and the Son and the Spirit loving perfectly from all eternity. Out of that love that is God came all that is. And God said, “Let us make man in our image.” Let us make humanity as creatures who find the meaning of their lives in love. Male and female will fit together and from that love will come more life, until the earth is filled with creatures in our image, consciously, freely, sacrificially loving each other. And loving us.

Next, let’s just ponder this plan. The Triune God called the world into being out of nothing. He created human beings. Could such a God not have already made the world filled with human beings? Could he not just have made all the humans he wanted? Of course he could have. But he didn’t do it that way. He created us to be participants. In effect, he said, “We had such delight as Father, Son and Spirit in making the world from our love. So we wanted you to get to do the same. We made you in our image. So be like us. Join together in love and make more of you! You’ll love it! Fill the earth with more and more image bearers in loving leadership over all creation.”

That’s quite a vision of humanity. Made to image the creative, life-giving God who is love. Sent to fill the earth with more life. It has always been about multiplying. About magnifying. About glory growing and love flowing.

Of course, the fall of humanity cracked the original plan. Death entered the world. Discord entered relationships. Disharmony interrupted our joyful participation. So not everyone finds a mate, or even should. Not every sacred relationship lasts, in fact all of them get sundered by death. Not everyone has children. Not every child

survives. The world is broken by sin. We know the vision. We believe in our bones in the ideal. But it doesn't always work out. There is much suffering.

When the Father sent his Son, he came to us as a man. As man remaking humanity. Bending us back to what we were meant to be. By his faithfulness, Jesus renewed the image of God in man. By his love, Jesus restored humanity to what we were meant to be. By his death, he took all this dying as his own and overcame it. By his resurrection, he emerged a new creation. Still who he was, but more so. Still human, but now outfitted for eternal life.

And the resurrected Jesus renewed the original creation purpose. The gospels record the different ways Jesus said this. But they all mean the same thing. He restores the mission of humanity. Last week we heard Jesus say on Easter, "that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations . . . You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24: 47-48). Matthew recalls Jesus' saying just before his ascension, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . ." (Mt. 28: 19). And in Mark he says, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk. 16: 15). The original plan returns. Multiply! Fill the earth. But now it means to multiply those who have been made new in Christ. As Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5: 17). When the gospel is shared, and the Spirit creates faith in the hearers, people are born again. They pass from death to life. They become part of the new creation. Jesus is the firstborn of the dead, so he is the firstborn of the new creation (Rev. 1: 5, Col. 1: 15). Those who believe into Christ become part of that renewed humanity. God's original plan is back in play. Out of love make new life. But now its deepest expression is not biological but spiritual. So all who are in Christ can be part of this multiplying restored creation, whether we are single or married or divorced or widowed, childless or child rich. We all participate in the new creation. We all contribute to spreading it by word and action.

That means each one of us in Christ has been significantly sent. That's a fundamental part of our identity. Our relationships are an essential part of what it means to be us. Most of the participation we have in sharing the gospel will be where we live and work. In this city, with these people. We are sent to go deeper in the relationships we have, and to extend further to new relationships with the love of Christ.

This morning I'd like to look at how we do this through one particular identity statement in Isaiah. The prophet put it this way:

And 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 (58: 12).

A key part of being significantly sent is owning our identity as Repairers of the Breach. God wants us fixing and renewing the old house like the one on Claycut. The word "breach" is an old word which refers to a gap or break.

If you say, "I'll be standing in the breach for you," you mean that you will be trying to fill in the gaps, to meet the needs, cover the blind spots, protect and defend. It moves me to think of the tired, battered defender standing in the breach so that those behind the walls may be kept safe. In Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*, the king cries out at the battle of Halflour, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, Or close the wall up with our English dead."¹ It was the English army which was attacking, but so vastly outnumbered were they, and so driven by courage and divine inspiration, that the words have the same effect. Once more unto the breach: to the place of danger, to the gap where life is won or lost.

The people in Isaiah's day, then, were promised a name which describes those who fill in the gaps created by human need. Literally, the people would return to Jerusalem to rebuild the ancient walls. Symbolically, they were called to much greater works of repair. Called home in the joy of the names of grace, they would find their continuing experience of God through living out their names of Repairer of the Breach.

Imagining ourselves now as bearing the name "Repairer of the Breach" on the basis of God's promise can help us to act in keeping with that identity. We pull the prophecy from the future into the present. We try on the name and look at the world through the eyes of someone described by it. Our plans might thus be shaped by the

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry the Fifth*, III, i, 1-2.

question, "*Where are the gaps I am called to fill today?*" We enter the world in search of the ruins we are called to rebuild.

The vocation associated with our names from God becomes more important than what we do to make a living or pass the time. These names shape our view of the world. We consider daily how we who are God's Delight can express such a love to a world whose streets are torn. This deeper work is to flow within every contact we have with another person. The name of our essential calling is to run underneath everything that we do. We imagine ourselves not according to the many titles people give to us but as those named "Restorer of Streets to Live In." And so all we do is transformed. Let's consider a few examples:

- You may return home one afternoon and walk into a maelstrom of accusations. "He broke my Legos!" "She hit me first!" "I hate him; he never leaves me alone." Your first instinct may be to sit on both of them, to solve the situation by overpowering it. But then you remember, "My name is Repairer. There are broken walls here. There is a gap in this relationship. How I can fill it?" And so you breathe deeply and begin to sort it out with patience and fairness.
- One night the last thing in the world you want to do may be talking to someone who needs you. You're tired. You don't want to share. You don't want to listen. Surely one more day of silence could go by with no further damage done. This relationship has lasted so far; it will keep tonight. But you remember, "My name is Restorer of Streets to Live In." Livable streets contain pleasant places of interchange. People look after each other on such streets. "So tonight, not tomorrow, I will listen and share."
- Off to visit a monotonous person whom you have put off time and again, you can transform the encounter from life sapping drudgery to enervating encounter. On the way, you begin to think, "What is the breach in her life? There is a hole ripped within from the loss of her husband. I will try to stand in the breach for her for these moments. I will try to close the gap between her life and the encroaching loneliness that threatens her with despair. For my name is Repairer of the Breach."

- Frustrated with the lack of response of the students to one of our mentoring programs, facing a group of volunteers who are equally frustrated, tired, and on the edge of quitting, you can breathe these names into your task. You suggest that the group consider the broken streets of these children, and how unlivable have been their dwellings. Then you recall together that you are the Restorer of Streets to Live In. And you know from working on houses that most of the hard work is preparing the surface. Hours are spent removing nails, sanding rough places, replacing rotted wood. It is only after all the painstaking work that the second coat of paint finally goes on and makes the home look restored. So you help your fellow tutors set their sights on simply being a smooth, sanded presence in the midst of a rough life. You aim simply to remove one nail at a time, one section of cracked paint, one pile of rubble from your students' lives.

In these and many other ways, we can grow in realizing how we are called to notice breaches in our daily lives, in our community and in our world. We are called to see them and to fill the gaps. The level of our restoring work will vary among us. The more we realize we are significantly sent, the more we will be able to bring that grace to others as Repairers. Each of us, though, could grow by stretching ourselves in such service.

The specific level of our work depends on the nudging of God's Spirit. We are all sent to different streets for the work of renovation. A good gauge of whether you are doing the right level of work to fulfill your name may be to consider if your service is resulting in the promised healing and intimacy with God. For as Isaiah promised, many people have found joy through the labor of standing in the breach for others.

When we see our work through the identity of being significantly sent to participate in God's renewal of his creation, we can find fresh motivation for the task. As we draw on Christ the new Adam, we remain in touch with our identity as God's beloved. Instead of burning out, we replenish, and our souls stand ready to respond to the clarion call of the High King of Heaven which sounds, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more."