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**May 16, 2008 Baccalaureate Sermon: *Repairers of the Breach, Isaiah 58:6-12***

Tonight I want to highlight 4 areas I think are key to becoming effective “repairers of the breach.” First: In order to “loose the chains of injustice” and “set the oppressed free,” as our text instructs we have to know who the oppressed are and be able to recognize the chains of oppression that need loosening. Second: We must be permeable to God’s leading and to our neighbor’s need, as we respond. Third: We have to find the courage to respond. And fourth: we can’t go it alone.

So first, we need to understand who it is that we’re accountable to, and what their oppression entails. In the Hebrew Bible we have story after story of God using prophets to call people to accountability for the injustices in their midst. So one role of the prophet is to sort of name the elephant in the room, and they’re rarely welcome for this tendency. Why is it so difficult for us to recognize the injustice that is right in front of us? Why do we need prophets?

Sometimes people can see something but they pretend not to notice. A friend of mine’s brother is an airplane pilot. He told the story of an incident on one of his flights, and it illustrates peoples’ ability to ignore the obvious. A woman went into the bathroom at the front of her cabin. After a couple of moments a man went up to the same bathroom. Somehow the latch had not fully engaged so when he approached the door the “Occupied” light wasn’t on. He opened the door and stepped in without realizing the woman was already there. Now you know how small those bathrooms are—there isn’t room for 1 person let alone 2. The woman immediately moved to pull up her slacks, not realizing that when the man stepped into the bathroom he’d actually stepped right into her slacks—so when she pulled her pants up she had her leg and one of his! Well, the worst thing happened—they fell out of the bathroom together and onto the

floor—him trying to get his leg out while she was trying to pull her slacks up! And do you know that while this was happening—the people in the cabin kept right on reading their magazines and newspapers, as though nothing was occurring in front of them! People have an amazing ability to ignore what’s right before them.

But more often when it comes to injustice it’s not that we ignore it, it’s that we don’t recognize it in the 1<sup>st</sup> place. Often the breach between us and others has grown so wide, we are so disconnected, that we cannot recognize another’s need as something that should concern us. My favorite saint, St. Margaret Urban Walker, writes that “Ours is a society pervasively segmented and stratified by gender, class, race, age, professionalization, sexual practice, and other hierarchies of power and status. Divisions of labor, opportunity, responsibility, and recognition both constitute and follow these hierarchies.”<sup>1</sup> These hierarchies drive where we live, and who we know. We often live in places where those around us look much like we do, we attend churches that are largely homogenous—Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Sunday morning church hour the most segregated hour in America.<sup>2</sup> Fifty years later it’s still true. Our friends often look like we do, and come from backgrounds similar to our own. It is easy to be separated from the lived experiences and needs of people outside our own circles. This is even truer when it comes to people outside of the United States.

Such separation allows us to live with our privilege unchallenged--hungry people don’t often knock on our doors looking for food; survivors of the Myanmar cyclone don’t stop us on the way to the T, people around the world dying from HIV Aids don’t ask us for help as we enter

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Spoken in a 1963 speech to Western Illinois University, noted in Sarah Sentilles, *A Church of her Own*, (Harcourt Press, FL, 2008), p. 10.

our homes. In fact, Walker reminds us that part of our privilege is “relief from familiarity with the less advantaged positions that make [ours] possible.”<sup>3</sup> So for example, in the US I am privileged to have access to cheap clothing produced in 2/3 world countries. My privilege does not require that I get to know the seamstress impoverished by the low wages she earned sewing my shirt. My privilege protects me from knowledge of those who are marginalized.

Robert Franklin writes that “The temptation when you are the beneficiary of a system that does great harm but was kind enough to grant you access and membership is to keep silent.”<sup>4</sup> And Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us that “A time comes when silence is betrayal.”<sup>5</sup> If we’re trying to live morally responsible lives, lives that contribute to justice in the world rather than injustice, we cannot afford to remain silent. But how then do we speak?

Systems of power render us unselfconscious to those around us who are hurt by these systems—and we cannot simply step outside them. James Baldwin reminds us, “You cannot escape the pathology of a country in which you’re born. You can resist it, you can react to it, you can do all kinds of things, but you’re trapped in it.”<sup>6</sup> How do we learn to *recognize* these problems, and more importantly, how do we insure that we live our lives ethically? How do we become repairers rather than enlargers of the breach?

Too often, the privileged person doesn’t see his or her own experience as one among many but as normative, as that against which everything else should be measured. We must

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<sup>3</sup> Walker, p. 271.

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Franklin, “The Gift of Black Pentecostalism,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Spring 2006, vol. 34, no. 2, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Breaking Silence: Beyond Vietnam,” sermon manuscript from April 4, 1967—one year before his assassination. Quoted in Franklin, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*.

work to educate ourselves about the systems of injustice that keep us from recognizing the realities of others' lives—we must cross the breach between ourselves and others. We cannot loosen the chains of injustice from others until we understand the chains around our own hearts and minds, the chains that keep us from recognizing others as people to whom we are morally accountable.

This is particularly important for you, graduates of Andover Newton, because you will be religious leaders. William Gaylin reminds us that:

“Religions...have the power to choose and identify “enemies.” They do so by defining evil or heretic populations: Jews, Irish Protestants/Catholics, Serbs/Croats, Muslims/Hindus. Genocide sanctioned by dogma or orthodoxy and rationalized by political leaders can then be declared a means of purification, a defense of principle—in the service of God or the good—and even an act of survival. Religious leaders have enormous special powers to influence the believer far beyond that afforded to secular leaders.”<sup>7</sup>

And the bar is high for you—alumni from this school have a long tradition of working against injustice. We are close to the anniversary of a day in 1851 (May 2) when 59 Andover Newton grads petitioned the Mass legislature not to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>8</sup> We expect great things from you as well.

Second: Loosing these chains from our hearts and minds enables us to be permeable to our neighbor's needs and to God's leading. Isaiah 58:10 describes this as “spending yourselves on behalf of the oppressed.” As people of faith, our work against injustice is not optional, it is to be the very thing that defines us *as people of faith*. For Christians—in John's gospel we're told that Jesus gave his disciples a new command—to love each other, and that in fact how they love

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<sup>7</sup> Willard Gaylin, *Hatred: The Psychological Descent into Violence* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> *The Liberator Files*, May 2, 1851, Andover Newton Seminary, [www.theliberatorfiles.com/764](http://www.theliberatorfiles.com/764).

each other will be the sign that they are disciples of Christ. Love of others is the Christian's ID card.

Unitarian Universalists have a similar ID card. Most of you know that the flaming chalice is our symbol for Unitarian Universalism. You may not know that this emblem symbolizes love for others and sacrifice for the sake of justice. It was created in 1941 by Hans Deutsch, an Austrian artist who lived in Paris in the 1930's. Deutsch used to draw cartoons that were critical of Hitler. As a result he had to flee Paris when the Nazis invaded it. In Portugal Deutsch became involved in the Unitarian Service Committee's efforts to assist people who needed to flee from Nazi persecution. The USC was unknown at that time, and those working within it needed a symbol by which they could recognize each other in this dangerous cloak and dagger world. They needed a sign all USC members would know, so they could trust those with whom they were working. Deutsch created the chalice and flame symbol to be used for this. So the sign of Unitarian Universalism was born out of action against injustice, on behalf of the neighbor. It is a sign of love.<sup>9</sup> So for people of faith love of others is the hallmark of faith, and it requires that we allow the needs of others to permeate our consciousness.

Third: So if we do loose the chains around our own recognition of the neighbor and take up the mandate as people of faith that we must work against injustice, how do we find the courage to move forward? Sometimes the task of eliminating injustice seems so huge we're paralyzed with inaction; or we doubt our personal abilities can make a difference. And sometimes our lives are so hectic we feel we can barely get through the necessities of each day, let alone do more.

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<sup>9</sup>Hotchkiss, Daniel D., p. 55 *Articulating your UU Faith*, the Unitarian Universalist Association, 2003.

The task of eliminating oppression is huge but it begins with small actions. Never underestimate the impact some small act may have. The Boston Globe recently ran a story about Tom Dowdy, an engineer at UPS who figured out that if UPS trucks made more right turns all the time instead of right and left turns, the company would burn thousands fewer gallons of gasoline, helping the environment and their bottom line. You see, when trucks are turning left they're often idling in traffic waiting for turn arrows or waiting for traffic to clear so they can turn. With a right-hand turn the truck can generally turn immediately, saving time and gasoline. UPS redesigned its routes to eliminate as many right turns as possible. The result? In 2007 UPS trucks shaved 30 million miles off delivery routes, saving 3 million gallons of gas and reducing truck emissions by 32,000 metric tons (the equivalent of 5,300 passenger cars).<sup>10</sup> Sometimes even a seemingly small contribution can make a huge difference. Take that 1<sup>st</sup> step.

2) Do not doubt that you can make a contribution, despite your limitations. I know many of you pretty well, and I've heard some of your doubts about what you can contribute. What God requires of us and what we think we're up to may seem like 2 different things but they're not.<sup>11</sup> "Consider the following profile of a young man, based on an actual case history:

- Talked about suicide for weeks at a time
- Reportedly wrote poetry about thrusting a dagger in his heart and "draw[ing] blood in showers."
- Was known to "go crazy," requiring the removal of knives and dangerous items from his room.
- Purchased opiates and cocaine.
- Wandered around with a gun during periods of suicidal ideation.
- Collapsed while speaking openly of his hopelessness and thoughts of suicide.
- Was eventually diagnosed with "recurrent major depression."

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<sup>10</sup> Parade Magazine, The Boston Globe, April 6, 2008, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> The following sentences/case is quoted from Gary Pavela, "Teaching Troubled Students," presentation at Virginia Tech University, July 13, 2007. [[http://docs.google.com/View?docid=dfdpvzp9\\_180c86vvt](http://docs.google.com/View?docid=dfdpvzp9_180c86vvt)]

Moreover, when this young man had many failings in his career<sup>12</sup>:

- 1832 defeated for state legislature
- 1833 failed in business
- 1836 nervous breakdown
- 1843 defeated for nomination to Congress
- 1849 rejected for land officer
- 1854 defeated for U.S. Senate
- 1856 defeated in run for nomination for Vice President
- 1858 defeated for Senate again
- 1860 elected President of the United States

This was Abraham Lincoln. Never underestimate what you can do, how God can use you, regardless of what your life may look like at any given time.

3) You have a contribution to make, but you may need to clear away some of the clutter of your life to do so. We often act as though Psalm 23 reads like this:

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest

It makes me lie down only when exhausted

It leads me to deep exhaustion.

It hounds my soul.

It leads me in circles of frenzy for activity's sake

Even though I run frantically from task to task,

I will never get it all done for my ideal is with me

Deadlines, and my need for approval—they drive me

They demand performance from me beyond the limits of my schedule.

They anoint my head with migraines

My in-basket overflows.

Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all the days of my life

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

And I will dwell in the bounds of frustration forever.

--Paul Borthwick<sup>13</sup>

This is not the life we are meant to lead. Isaiah provides us with a promise, something that comes with working against injustice: “The Lord will guide you always, will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.” If you are racing through your life exhausted that is of your own doing, not what God wants for you. God understands the necessity of plunging into the waters and resting beside them; of toiling in the hot sun and resting under the shade of the tree. Even Jesus went into the desert to rest, and his ministry was only 3 years long (and he knew that). Surely we are not more valuable than he was—if he can rest so can we. Without rest you will not be effective in this work against injustice—it demands our best, and we’re never at our best when we’re exhausted.

Finally, we can’t do this work alone. But remember, we are never in justice work alone—although we sometimes feel like we are. Never forget that God has been working against injustice long before we ever showed up! God has been working against racism, against sexism, against heterosexism, and more before we even knew what they were. Don’t mistake your individual actions for the whole team—you’re simply a player that’s been called onto the field—the game’s already been in progress. You must respond to the call, but you’re never acting alone.

We need allies for this journey. We need allies that help us move beyond the borders of our own lives.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Borthwick, *Simplify: 106 Ways to Uncomplicate Your Life*, Authentic Press, 2007.

I went to a small “Christian” college in the middle of Indiana—750 students in the whole school when I was there. In my 1<sup>st</sup> year I had an African American roommate named Rhonda. Rhonda was the 1<sup>st</sup> African American person I ever got to know well. As we grew closer she shared with me that each year every new African American student at the school received a letter from the Indiana Ku Klux Klan letting them know that the Klan knew who they were and where they lived. Before getting to know Rhonda I would have thought that the lives of African American students at the school were like my own—because of my privilege I was ignorant of the realities of racism in America. By sharing her world with me Rhonda gave me the ability to move beyond the confines of my own experience, and by doing so I became a better ally to her. I became better equipped to begin to understand the terrible breach caused by racism and respond. If we are ever going to overcome the realities of injustice in this world we need to build relationships across boundaries of difference. Only in doing so do we have a chance of repairing the enormous breaches that have come to characterize much of modern life. We need each other. Look around you—you represent a wealth of strengths and gifts. You leave this place in good company. Stay connected, and use each other.

To be repairers of the breach we must first be able to recognize the breach between ourselves and others. That’s what prophets did—they pointed out the breaches in people’s relationships with each other, particularly with those who were marginalized and oppressed. The bridge between myself and others has been all but destroyed by systems of injustice. We need to get busy in this repair work. But to do so we need prophets in our lives, people who call us to account—Rhonda was a prophet in my life. Prophets help us understand the work that needs to be done, and they hound us until we pick up the trowel and begin to repair the breach. Cultivate prophets who believe in you enough to hold you accountable to what you don’t yet understand.

(And remember that true prophets are generally a pain in the neck—they give us a picture of ourselves in the world that is far different than the one we'd like to believe is true.) Be prophets for each other, remembering that if your work is not done out of a primary motive of love it is not the work of people of faith. Love is the only cement strong enough to keep the breaches in our lives repaired. And remember this most of all, before we ever knew the wall existed, let alone the breaches, God—the spirit of life in each of us--has been there working, pointing out where the trowel was and waiting for us to begin.

Robert Frost wrote a poem many years ago that is appropriate for our self-centered and individualistic world,

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

As people of faith, our poem should be:

Two roads diverged into the world,  
and I took the one where need abounds,  
and brought everyone I could with me,  
across every conceivable difference of faith and more,  
and God with us, that has made all the difference.

Amen. Blessed be. May it be so.

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Benediction:

Now may you go out from this place of worship and celebration, to live lives of hope and healing in this wounded world. Be prophets for each other, and for us.

And may God, the spirit of all life, grant you wisdom and courage, peace and joy.

Amen.