

Former Things and a Gracefully Forgetful God  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
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Isaiah 65:17-25

Sometimes in the life of a community an issue seizes center stage and demands attention. It may roar like a lion or sit unavoidably like an elephant in the middle of the room. Either way, nothing else is going to happen until it is confronted and addressed.

So it is with our city this morning. Around dinner tables and over coffee counters, on the sidelines at kids' athletic events and in the break room at work, over the media's airwaves and printing presses, our neighbors are all talking and reading about it: What happens next with our schools? And what's happening with our community's ability to talk about race?

In medicine, doctors refer to what they call "the presenting issue" when something goes wrong with a patient that may reveal a larger problem. That "presenting issue" is, of course, the decision last week to close and consolidate a number of schools, a decision that directly affects 25,000 children, almost of whom are at-risk and African-American.

But, just as a heart disease doesn't develop overnight, we didn't get to this place in the just last few days. This particular decision was almost a year in the making. But the history goes back further, generations in fact. Years of decision-making built up to this, multiple boards of county commissioners, school board members and school superintendents, economic recessions and expansions, good times and hard times and a range of new educational practices and programs.

And underneath all of this are factors that reveal us as a city - geographic separation of black and white and now Latino and Asian-American neighborhoods, class separation, urban and suburban development patterns, a long-term sense of history in Charlotte by some and the newcomer perspectives of others and a racial tension that seems to rest just beneath the surface.

What gets lost in the heat of debate is the fact that our school system is nationally recognized for its results and management, a fact that is better understood by education experts beyond the county line than by the average county resident. But it is also large and complex, made up of some schools that look alike and others that look nothing alike because they face unique challenges.

Frequent changes in the superintendent's office, ebbs and flows of political courage by our elected leaders, years of impossibly fast-paced growth in the suburbs that demanded resources at the same time that many inner city schools were struggling and falling behind in terms of student achievement. All of that helped get us here. Over time, the demographics of the school system shifted to the point today that roughly half of its students live in poverty.

Then, the Great Recession hit. It ripped off the scab that had covered our broken places, exposing the rifts and differences between us, all heightened by three years of economic pain, uncertainty, anxiety and fear. What might have been a rational discussion became impossible because it's hard to be rational when the future of our children is at stake. One seasoned observer of all this told me this week that there is no more divisive issue than school closings. Standing here today, we all see her evidence.

Resentment, suspicion and deep-seeded feelings of neglect have rushed to the surface. Some have cried "racism."

So we find ourselves at an important crossroads as a city, a city that has not been as rocked as other cities by racial division. And here's the thing: All that we have seen so far was over the need to carve savings of \$6 million out of the school budget. But the experts say another \$50 to \$100 million in additional cuts must come next year, thanks to the recession and dwindling federal, state and local funds.

How will we go forward? It's a bit like a married couple that has a big argument and goes to bed angry. What do you do the next morning to try to set things right?

Already, people are organizing. They are coming together by school. Some are uniting by their color, some by class and others by other special interests. There is talk of lawsuits.

Others are more focused on the "how" of this civic dialogue. They are talking about how we can have an orderly and civil community conversation that can point to equitable solutions. They are ready to put money forward to help. Regardless of interest or perspective, all know there is more to come in what has, at times, been a raw exchange so far and they want to be ready.

In times such as these, the people of God turn to God for guidance. When they are not sure of what direction to take, they remind themselves that true north is always, always the will of God as best we know it through the story of God's people and in Christ Jesus.

This morning we heard a passage from the closing chapters of the prophecy of Isaiah, God's vision and will for the world.

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; that former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.... I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy .... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox and the serpent's food will be dust. (Isaiah 65, selected verses)

It's a beautiful vision, isn't it, a world without disagreements, hard decisions or accusations? Even natural enemies like the wolf and the lamb coexist peacefully. A world where no infants die and all live to old age.

I will go ahead and say what many of us might be thinking: It's a vision that can, at times, be difficult for us to picture. For some, it's just too distant to put their faith in. It seems out of reach, which it is of course, without God. And sometimes that is a lesson God's people have had to learn through extreme measures.

The prophecy of Isaiah spans decades, covering the exile of God's people at the hands of the Assyrians to their return home, when hope takes root again. In the end, it is about salvation, as the prophet's closing vision so vividly illustrates. But that vision is preceded by God's judgment, God's holding God's people accountable for idolatry, injustice and the abuse of the poor at the hands of the rich and powerful.

Throughout, the question persists, the same question that resonates through the entire Old Testament: Will God's people learn from their errors? Will they amend their ways? Will their suffering make a difference? Will they reorder their society so that one family's gain doesn't come at another's expense? Will they reestablish justice?

By the time we get to the end of the book of Isaiah and today's chapter, God's people are back at home, returned from exile. There is evidence they had begun to rebuild the temple that the Assyrians had destroyed. They are, at the very least, going through the motions.

But they are also divided and cynical. They are, after all, human. We should be careful about putting God's people on a pedestal, in this case assuming that they learned their lesson and were model citizens and perfect disciples after their exile. They weren't. And God knew that. So, through Isaiah, God gets their attention. God plays, if you will, God's trump card – a vision so audacious it trumps even the most bitter and cynical believer.

God not only promises forgiveness; God assures the people that their sins will be forgotten.

“... the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” (65:17)

In the words of Eugene Peterson’s translation called *The Message*, “All the earlier troubles, chaos and pain are the things of the past, to be forgotten.”

This is the breadth and depth of God’s promise, God’s vision, God’s grace. God pledges a radical repair of our broken, human condition. And in Christ Jesus, who died for our sins and robbed death of its power, that vision came to pass.

But, as I have said, we should not read Isaiah and separate God’s salvation from God’s judgment. Most of the prior 64 chapters of this prophecy are God’s expression of profound disappointment.

In Isaiah, God chose a prophet with a passion for a specific place, a city, Jerusalem. Isaiah criticized its leaders for their hypocrisy and expediency, for abandoning God’s ways and cutting deals with foreign powers just to protect the affluent establishment. He called out the leaders for their immorality and the people for their lack of courage to do the hard work of maintaining a fair and just city.

In the end, as in today’s verses, Isaiah tempers his scorn with hope. He gives us today’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth. And, as we bring the church year to a close next week and enter a new church year with the Advent season, let us take note that Isaiah also foretells how the new heaven and earth will come about. In chapter 7, he writes:

“Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son,  
and shall call his name Immanuel.”

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I don’t pretend to have the answers to the critical questions that face our city and our schools. I am not an education specialist. Nor am I a sociologist or a city planner. I know of no silver bullets to the underlying social inequities. But I can see as plainly as anyone that the nerves of our city are frayed.

With another \$50 to \$100 million in school budget cuts ahead, we have only just begun a very difficult process. The next few months – and maybe even years - will define our city, more than pro sports teams, more than new museums or even the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

What's needed is a full and frank dialogue about the present challenges and future implications, but one that is informed by the past, including what has been tried and failed.

And while it should be a civil dialogue, we should not pretend there is not anger and frustration in the community. The burden of these awful cuts has not been shared, this time or in past chapters of this same story. Their anger is justified. After all, our God has his own times of frustration and anger. In fact, as the book of Isaiah records, God was angry and disappointed with the people of Israel for more than a century.

The lives of God's people in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC may seem remote from our squabbles and difficulties. But, at the core, some eternal truths emerge. Among them is that the people are in peril when one group becomes too distanced from another, when class or geography or experience or self-interest or apathy allow some people to lose touch with the hardships of another and come to believe their fates are not intertwined.

A related truth is that when a problem that affects the present and future of people arises, the burden of addressing that problem is best shared by all rather than placing it on the shoulders of the most vulnerable and oppressed.

Here in the year 2010, we must ask ourselves if we are doing enough to share the future with all of our children and doing what we must, what is moral and just, for the half of our school children that come from poor homes and must overcome all the attendant hurdles. We must ask whether we have really made the kind of commitment to all of our children to provide an education that prepares them for the world they will inherit, much less, more fundamentally, to earn a decent living or get a job at all.

Even then, statistics show that money goes only so far. It does not always level the playing field. That is when we must reach even deeper inside ourselves and our community to do the hard work that gets past emotions and delivers us all to a place of reconciliation across race and class and neighborhood, where we can stop shouting and start working together. That outcome has proven elusive to Americans for decades.

As God's people in this place and in this process, may our creator speak to us as he spoke to Jerusalem through Isaiah. Let us hold God's bold vision before us and put our

trust and faith in our sovereign God, the master who can make the wolf lie down with the lamb, whose grace is gracefully forgetful, even of the worst we can do ... and who showed us his will most clearly as Immanuel, the Christ, God with us.

Amen.