

Isaiah, Community, and the Prisoner's Dilemma

- Isaiah 58:9a-12** If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
¹² 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.

When Melis and I lived in Princeton I remember one day I was walking around the University campus when I saw an unusual sight. There were a whole bunch of large trucks scattered around, people carrying long metal poles with various attachments, and a fair number of people dressed in suits and hats who looked like they stepped out of a time machine from the 1940's.

I asked somebody what the heck was going on, and they told me it was the film crew shooting what would become the 2001 winner for Best Picture: A Beautiful Mind. If you saw the movie or read the book by Sylvia Nasar, you know it tells the story of John Nash, one of the most brilliant mathematicians of the 20th century. When Nash applied to graduate school his adviser from Carnegie Tech wrote his recommendation in one sentence: "This man is a genius." What makes Nash's story so more compelling, though, is that for nearly all of his adult life he also suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, almost ending his career time and time again.

But Nash hung in there in spite of his disease, and he eventually won the world's most prestigious recognition for intellectual work: the Nobel prize. Nash won the Nobel prize in economics for his work in what is known as game theory. Game theory is a branch of practical mathematics that attempts to describe any kind of group behavior where an individual's success is related to the choices others make. Another way of saying that is Nash studied what was likely to happen any time two or more people tried to figure out how to live together.

One of the most famous types of scenarios Nash described is called the Prisoner's Dilemma. Here is the dilemma: imagine two prisoners who conspired to commit a crime. Now they are caught and in separate jail cells unable to communicate. The police don't have enough evidence to convict and offer them both the same deal. Here's the deal:

- A) If both of them are loyal to one another and stay silent, they will each serve a short sentence on a minor charge.
- B) If both of them rat on one another, or defect Nash calls it, then they will each serve a full term. Not good.
- C) But, and here's the wrinkle, if one of them defects and rats the other out, but the other one stays silent and loyal: then the defector goes scot-free while the other serves the full sentence.

So again, if both prisoners are loyal and cooperate, they will each pay a small price. If you think of them as partners, or a community- this is the best option. Each suffers a little, but not too much. And of course if you both betray one another, you both wind up serving the full sentence, which is lousy. But at least you're in it together. The most interesting possibility, what really makes this game fascinating, is the possibility that you could be loyal, and that rat

fink could betray you. Then you would serve the whole sentence, while the other would go absolutely free and pay nothing at all. Dah! And then, there's always the possibility in the back of your mind that if he stayed silent you could defect and walk- and really, if you're honest with yourself, you never really liked him in the first place. You don't like to think of yourself as a traitor, but hey, you've got to be practical, right?

Now here's the thing, even though the best decision for both would be to clam up and have one another's back, Nash will tell you for the individual this is not the best decision. The best decision, the most logical decision is to defect. Check it out. Because if you choose to trust- you know you will serve a little time, but you might get betrayed and get stuck with whole sentence alone. If you defect, sure you might serve the sentence, but they will, too, which feels fair. And you might even go totally free. So, for Nash it's a no brainer- you and I shouldn't trust and cooperate with one another in most cases- it's just too risky. We should just look after our own interests. No one else will.

And experimentally, this is what happens when psychologists study people who actually play this game? In one experiment where strangers come in and play the game- people defect. The very possibility that that other person might betray you and send you down the river while they could get away scot free is enough for most people to forgo the win-win choice.

And we see this in the real world, too. Globally, the prisoner's dilemma was used to understand the arms race between America and the Soviet union after World War II. It wasn't in either of our interests to spend so much money on weapons that would destroy the planet 100

times over. But neither side trusted the other. I mean anyone who had seen Rocky 4 knows you can't trust Russia! And so both sides kept making more and more weapons just in case and taught a whole generation how to duck and cover. (How that was ever supposed to help you in a nuclear blast I have no idea.)

And this is equally true on the personal level. Any relationship you enter requires some amount of personal sacrifice on your part- you are always having to give this or that up to keep the peace and make the relationship work. But if one of the partners starts to feel like they are doing all of the giving and adjusting, it doesn't take long before they get tired and think about defecting, too. When that other person seems to always think of themselves first, you start to feel foolish and taken advantage of when you keep trying to sacrifice for the team. I think it's safe to say that nearly every relationship that falls apart, it's rarely one giant breach that does it, no, it's the thousand tiny little moments where one partner had the opportunity to deepen the trust or repair damage done, and they just didn't do it. Until over time the love just gets choked out.

Well, this way of thinking, this prisoner's dilemma, this is what was going on with the people of God Isaiah is writing to in the text for this morning. The part of Isaiah we're reading from is what scholars call Second Isaiah- and it comes from the restoration period in the fifth and early fourth century before the time of Jesus. In the Babylonian exile Babylon came in and destroyed the temple and in two waves carried off almost all the people. In the first wave they carried off the leaders, and in the second wave they carried off the regular folks. But sometimes we forget that they didn't actually exile the entire population. They left a group of people behind

to tend the fields and shepherd the flocks, a people who came to be known as the *am ha aretz*, the people of the land. These people were the poorest, the least educated, but for seventy years they were the only Israelites living in the land.

So, what happens is that when Cyrus of Persia rises up and smacks down the Babylonians and sends the Jews back home- the story isn't quite as simple as sometimes it's told. It's not like all of Israel came marching back to a completely empty land. They come back and discover a Jewish community that had been doing all of the cooking and cleaning while everyone else had been living it up in the hanging gardens of Babylon.

Now the exiles could have sat down with the *am ha aretz*, the people of the land- they could have sat down and decided to work together. They could have decided to trust and to cooperate. But they don't. The exiles march back in, and they don't thank the *am ha aretz* for running the place- they say what do you think you're doing trying to lead. Go back to the fields, go back to the sheep. We'll let you know when we want to hear from you. But don't hold your breath. You hear this hinted at in Isaiah's text- about the yoke, the finger pointing, the speaking of evil, and the hungry and afflicted. The exiles could have cooperated, but they chose to defect.

But don't think that the *am ha aretz* are somehow innocent. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the history of this period. And Nehemiah records a letter that the *am ha aretz* write against the exiles- telling the Persians that the exiles are really up to no good and they better come in and intervene against the exiles and knock heads. They'd rather the Persians come in and everyone have nothing- than to watch the exiles just take over.

So both sides are locked in this prisoner's dilemma, and they are behaving exactly like Nash tells us is logical. They aren't trusting one another; they are not cooperating. They are not choosing relationship- they are circling the wagons and choosing defensive self-protection.

And after a while, after reading all this, and thinking about it all week- I have to admit I was left wondering at times if there's any hope for community- for relationship. Nash is a genius. I'm not. I can't deny his analysis. I can't deny that it's probably more rational not to trust each other. I can't deny the experience of the exiles and the am ha aretz. I spent a lot of time this week wondering if relationship, community- if it's even possible, or if we just fool ourselves and make do with pretend communities as long as they are convenient.

But then I did the only thing I know to do- I kept reading Isaiah- and thank God for the rest of Isaiah. Isaiah, who is as realistic as it gets, who has seen the absolute worst in terms of what we're capable of, Isaiah absolutely sings to the exiles. And his message is to try, to trust. His message is to reach across the lines- and not because of what you might get out of it, not because of your dreams for yourself; but because of God's dream of a more beautiful community- a kind of community the people can't even imagine yet.

“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a

watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

Isaiah says there is something better than just clinging to our interest groups and only hanging out with the people who already agree with us on pretty much everything. Reach out, he says. Reach across. Take the risk of trusting the Other. Could you get hurt? Absolutely. But if they reach back, together, and with the Spirit of God, you will be capable of a kind of healing that can change the world- you might someday be known as repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets.

And do you know what? As smart as Nash was. As smart as he was- it turns out even Nash didn't fully understand the prisoner's dilemma. It is true that when psychologists observed strangers coming in and playing a prisoner's dilemma game that they would defect and betray one another. That's true. BUT. What Nash didn't foresee was a slightly different experiment by a guy named Robert Axelrod called the iterated prisoner's dilemma. Iterate just means to repeat. And in the iterated version players come together and agree to play not just a few times- but hundreds of times. In other words they decide to form a kind of community with one another. And when people do this, something fascinating happens. What happens is that more often than not, people take the risk of trusting the other player- knowing full well they could get hurt. But they take the risk of trusting knowing that if they cooperate, over the long haul if they work together both will be better off than if they defect.

And so, relationship and trust- it's true it's hard. It's rare. And maybe it isn't even natural or logical. But by some beautiful miracle of God- it is possible. We are capable of it. We just have to decide whether you want to point the finger and speak evil- or whether we would rather be known as a repairer of the breach, a restorer of streets.

The most beautiful thing I have heard in a long time came from Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times this week. Kristof has taken his own life in his hands to travel into Egypt when everyone else is trying to get out. And he's not just reporting from a distance, but he and a camera man have walked right into the heart of freedom square.

The protest started out peaceful, but this week pro-government forces, largely made up of ex-cons who came armed with weapons and have been causing havoc. And for a protestor, it's a classic prisoner's dilemma. If you're an individual protesting- if you decide to stay loyal to the group the best that can happen is you add your voice; but the worst that can happen is you might be killed, which is happening. If you leave there's always another day. The logical choice based on self-interest for an individual is to back away. To defect.

But here's what Kristoff saw this week:

“Inside Tahrir Square on Thursday I met a carpenter named Mahmood whose left arm was in a sling, whose leg was in a cast and whose head was being bandaged in a small field hospital set up by the democracy movement. This was the seventh time in 24 hours that he had needed medical treatment for injuries suffered at the hands of government-backed mobs. But as soon as Mahmood was bandaged, he tottered off once again to the front lines...I was

awestruck...but as I snapped Mahmood's picture I backed into Amr's wheelchair. It turned out that Amr had lost his legs many years ago in a train accident, but he rolled his wheelchair into Tahrir Square to show support for democracy...Amr was being treated for a wound from a flying rock. I asked him politely as I could what a double-amputee in a wheelchair was doing in a pitched battle involving Molotov cocktails, clubs, machetes, bricks, and straight razors. "I still have my hands," he said firmly. "God willing, I will keep fighting."

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/04/opinion/04kristof.html?_r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss

This month is Mission month here. We're going to be hearing about different possibilities; different opportunities. But fundamentally mission means making the choice not just to keep to yourself, but to reach out, to risk. It means not hoarding our time, and talent, and treasure for ourselves- but to offer it up, all the hope that God really is doing new things in our midst every single day.

And the question for each one of us comes down to this- do we want to be disciples of John Nash? Do we want to be known as reasonable, rational, and risk averse people who piled as much stuff up as we could? Or, do we want to listen to Isaiah and that other middle eastern carpenter, the one who laid down his life for others? Can we step into an uncertain future together trusting that in God's hands we someday be known as repairers of the breach; restorers of the streets? Who do you want to be? **Amen.**