



One Humanity, Under God

Isaiah 56:1-8

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For the past two years, I've had the joy of sharing this space with you. I've had the honor of serving as your pastor, and I'm looking forward to our continued time serving along side one another in this church and this community. I hope that in the past two years you've come to understand my approach to preaching and teaching. I believe strongly in staying close to the Biblical text, while striving to ensure that your time in worship on Sundays is not wasted on learning only what was and has been, but expands your understanding of how what was and has been affects our call to faithfulness and discipleship today.

In connecting God's historic Good News in the Biblical text to today's world, I try to avoid making leaps into modern society that are not clearly initiated by the Scriptural text. I've said to you before that while I will not publically claim a political side, the Biblical text does allow, and at times even mandates, preaching that makes connections to political topics. When such a connection requires stretching too far, I try to avoid speculation and proclaiming with certainty what is not made clear in God's story of salvation.

But there are times when the Scriptural text is clear regarding modern day application. There are times when the Biblical mandate, in teaching God's will, offers guidance without speculation. There are times when the Good News, professed by the prophets of God and the witness of Christ, does not allow for a diversity of understanding. When the teachings of Scripture line up to speak a prophetic word in the midst of modern day turmoil, when the pre-selected Lectionary texts flawlessly line up to speak God's truth in the midst of our struggling society, to fail to proclaim the Good News would not only be unprofessional and lazy, it would be a failure of pastoral responsibility and a failure of faithful proclamation.

Today's Scriptural texts offer such a moment. So, while I thought it was already clear, let the Word of God wash away any doubt, the Biblical Word and the witness of God's will in the life of Jesus Christ does not offer any wavering opinion: there is no place in God's kingdom for racism, white supremacy, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism, excluding others, having hatred toward others, casting out others, or the act of 'othering' people in general. The witness of God's will in the life of Jesus Christ proves God's love for *all* humanity, regardless the color of their skin, their perceived or expressed gender or sexual identity, their faith or lack thereof, their country of origin or their country of citizenship.

I understand that such a proclamation is not agreed upon unilaterally in our nation, or even among some who hold temporary residence in our city. I would not presume to make such a statement without being willing to back up my conviction. Therefore, let us consider today's

Scriptural text to see how God's Word mandates such a statement be made in our current social climate.

Scholars have suggested that the first section of Isaiah, chapters 1 – 39, was written before Israel was sent into exile, as a warning of what would happen if Israel did not maintain their faithfulness to the Lord. The second section of Isaiah, chapters 40 – 55, was written to the people of Israel in exile, promising of God's covenant and maintaining God's faithfulness even in their current state of hardship. The third section, beginning here in chapter 56 and going to 66, is speaking to the people Israel as they are returning from exile.

Throughout the middle section of Isaiah, to a people in exile, the prophet promised that even though they were in a season of hardship, God was going to do a new thing in bringing them out of exile. For example, in Isaiah 43, we read, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" If God's promise was to return the people to their homeland without making any changes to what the community looked like, God's promise wouldn't have been to do a new thing, it would have been to do an old thing. But here, in Isaiah 43, the Lord invites the people to forget the way things were, and to be prepared to welcome the *new* thing God is about to do.

In our passage from chapter 56 this morning, God kicks off this new thing that is happening coming out of exile by making some strong claims. Beginning in verse 1, we hear the proclamation of God, "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed." In speaking to a people who have just returned from exile, a people who were abused, a people who were lost, a people who have struggled, the first thing God says is to maintain justice and do what is right. There is no call to retaliation, revenge, or outrage. God proclaims that even after a season of hurt and pain, justice must be maintained.

But the call of the text is not just to return home in peace and maintain the status quo. God has promised a new thing is going to happen. As we read on in chapter 56, we begin to understand what shape this new thing is going to take. The call to justice is not simply a call to dig in and return to a life once known, "Salvation and deliverance are not isolationist or retaliatory. The next verses demonstrate a new direction that will deepen God's covenantal relationship with the people."ⁱ

In verse 3, we read, "Do not let the foreigner joined in the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people.'" As the people of Israel returned home, there were now new people living among them. There were people who had moved into their region while they were in exile. When the King of Persia, Cyrus, gave the decree to allow the community of Jews to return to their land of Israel, others moved back with them. These foreigners were not native to Israel. They did not have the same customs as the Jews. They looked different, ate differently, dressed differently, and spoke in foreign tongues. But God demands that these foreigners should not be fearful that they would be outcast because of their differences. The

new thing God is doing upon the Israelites return from exile is to broaden the community of the faithful to include people who were not previously included.

After naming that the foreigner was to be included, we read that eunuchs will also now be included. This may seem like a trivial and odd statement to make as they are returning from exile. But there is historic significance in this statement. To understand how this fits into God's new plan, we must go back to the historic text of Deuteronomy. As part of the TORAH, as part of God's original law for the Jewish community, we find in Deuteronomy 23 this exclusion of eunuchs, as it reads, "No one emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord."

In the early days of the Lord's deliverance of Israel, there were these laws that allowed for the exclusion of certain individuals. People were excluded due to bodily disfigurement or nationality. But here in Isaiah 56, as God is leading the people back from exile, God is proclaiming a new identity for the community. Not only are these once outcast groups of people to be included, we read in verse 5 these eunuchs will be given names that are praised higher than even the sons and daughters of Israel. They are going from being the outcast to being the favored. The foreigners will go from being excluded to holding positions of prominence in the temple.

Verse 7 and 8 conclude this opening invitation to the new thing God is doing, saying, "The house of the Lord shall be a house of prayer for *all* peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts to Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

In the return from exile, the community of God's people is being expanded to include those never before included. If eunuchs and foreigners are still excluded, the community will have failed to become the community God is proclaiming. Re-acclimation after exile can only be completed when the community is not excluding others.ⁱⁱ The Lord is redefining "Israel's relationship with foreign nations, widely expanding the purview of God's deliverance and salvation. Such salvation should no longer be seen as the byproduct of ethnicity, nationality, race, or cultic membership. It is, instead, open to all who respond with justice and righteousness, who join themselves to God by keeping the Sabbath and holding fast to God's promises."ⁱⁱⁱ

The expansion of Israel that begins with the return from exile continues in the witness of God's love through the mission and ministry of Christ. What we find as we keep reading through the Biblical narrative is that while, "The people of God will have a particular demographic boundary at any given moment in history, God is always redefining it to include those left out."^{iv}

In Matthew 15, beginning in verse 21, we're told that Jesus left the area of Galilee where he had been and travelled to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are along the Mediterranean coast, much further north and west of Galilee. They are coastal cities in a region that lies outside of Israel. Jesus has traveled to a non-Jewish region, when "A Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my

daughter is tormented by a demon.' But Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' Jesus answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' Jesus answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

This text is perhaps a bit harder to understand. But let's consider the story. Jesus has gone into a non-Jewish territory and seems to be on a mission, as he names, 'I have been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Jesus seems to be looking for Jews who had moved away and are now considered 'lost sheep.' We've heard Jesus tell a parable about going to find the one lost sheep of the flock; here, he seems to be living out that call. Being on a mission to find those who had turned from God is not out of the expectation for Jesus.

As he enters into this territory he encounters a woman who is a Canaanite. She is not Jewish. She had never been Jewish. She is an outsider to the community of Israel. She calls for Jesus to help her, as her daughter is tormented by a demon. Jesus hears her, but does not answer her. He ignores her and continues walking.

Ignoring and dismissing her seems very unlike Jesus. Perhaps he had other thoughts in his mind? Perhaps he was focused on finding specific people so as to bring them back to the community? As Jesus continues, the woman continues calling to him. The disciples urge Jesus to send her off because she is not letting up. Jesus responds to them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It's like he isn't even interested in attending to her needs.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She came and knelt before Jesus saying, "Lord, help me."

In what I think of as one the most insensitive things Jesus ever says, he responds to her, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This may be the most politically incorrect response Jesus ever offers. He says, I will not take what has been given to me to provide for the people of Israel, the children of God, and give it to you, a Canaanite, for you are nothing but a dog. Jesus is refusing to offer her help.

Yet again, she persisted, saying, "Yes, but even dogs eat the crumbs of the master's table."

Her persistence finally pays off. To her response, Jesus yields, saying, "Great is your faith. Your daughter shall be healed."

The woman was outside the purview of salvation and Jesus was ready to write her off. But just as God says to the people of Israel returning from exile, the love of God is ever expanding to include those we previously wanted to exclude.^v Perhaps there is never an example of the mind of God being swayed as there is in this story, when Christ heeds to the needs of another who had been outcast and excluded at their persistence. Arguably Jesus did change his mind, and

even re-framed his mission, for if you look through the rest of the Gospel of Matthew, in the remaining 13 chapters, Jesus never again claims to have come only to the lost sheep of Israel.

When you take these stories in tandem, and consider the plethora of Biblical texts that speak of the movement of God, you find this same practice takes place time after time after time. The community which was once limited in scope and quite exclusive has continually expanded and broadens to be more and more inclusive. From welcoming foreigners and eunuchs, to including the poor and the destitute, to including the Canaanites and Samaritans, the portrayal of God's desired gathering only continues to expand.

We could probably sit and argue over the extent to which God's kingdom continues to expand. We each probably have opinions about who should be included and who shouldn't. But for as much as we don't know, I know this much for certain: That which was previously excluded by God eventually becomes included in God's ever widening circle of love.

So in the promise of the new thing God is doing, in the witness of Christ taking a pause from a focused mission to offer and extend love to the outcast, in the call and witness to include those previously excluded, we must ask ourselves, what are we doing today to make sure we are not maintaining the exilic mentality of isolation and exclusion? Are we maintaining this idea of American exceptionalism that for hundreds of years has said only one select community is to be included? Or, are we living in a kingdom mindset that says the love of God extends beyond one small community, one singular race, and one proud nation? In the ever expanding witness of God's kingdom on earth, we are not called to limit our influence to our subcommunity of comfort, but we are called to stand up for, speak up on behalf, and ensure that we do not forget the love of God is intended for all.

So in the midst of a national crisis of identity, in the midst of a season when we find the voice of the racist so willing to speak up, may you claim your identity as a beloved child of God, and accept your invitation to be part of the new and continuing work of God to ensure every person knows the love of God, that the community of God welcomes them, and that through the power of Christ, we can become a living witness of God's kingdom on earth, that speaks up and acts out on behalf of the great love of the Lord which offers peace to all. For the glory of God, may you speak up and extend God's love to everyone you encounter. Amen.

ⁱ Stephanie Y. Mitchem. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Michael H. Floyd. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wendel W. Meyer. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

^{iv} Floyd.

^v David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved August 16, 2017.