

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Open Invitation”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, August 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Thus says the LORD:

*Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.*

*And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.*

Thus says the Lord GOD,

*who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy

shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Will you pray with me? Holy One, You call us to remember that all are welcome. And as we are reminded of that this day, may our hearts and minds be open to the words we wrestle with. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

As I read the passages about foreigners in the lectionary today, I found myself thinking about what it feels like when one is an outsider. When one travels it's easy to feel like a stranger when you want to do things in another country that we take for granted here at home, like how to buy a bus ticket or, in the old days, how to use a public payphone. I remember times when Scott and I wandered around hoping that someone would gesture to us with hand signals how to do that something. And it made me aware of how hard it can be for those who come here and how important it is to help people from other countries understand and get the information they need.

This morning's reading speaks to how to interact with who is included and who is not. And we find that Isaiah and Paul offer a different perspective from some of the others in Scripture, for these passages are clearly different. In many places in the Bible we are told that the Hebrew people were a community of people that need to be setting themselves apart. Now let's be clear. Let's not think that other peoples don't do the same thing. The Hindu caste tradition, for example, has a very clear line between the various caste levels, and it's a line not to be crossed. Or those of you who love Downton Abbey, remember those episodes especially at the beginning where the very act of sitting at the dining room table became a way to evaluate who was upper class and who wasn't, and that there were many rules that were not spoken of but expected to be known.

For many who were Jewish, there are rules about what is clean and what is not clean, many of which are still practiced today. And I watched a series called Unorthodox, a story of a young woman who grew up in a very conservative Jewish community in New York City and was struggling with it. Almost every facet of everyday life was connected to the rule of faith: what clothing to wear, the mixing of particular foods, the rituals of weddings with the shortening of the hair of the bride. While I had known some of this, I learned it was much more nuanced in the inner sanctum of that community than I realized. And there is beauty in ritual and routine and reminders of our relationship with God, but one can see it also is a way to set the tone for judging who is faithful and who is not.

Now it's important to consider why and how this setting a part of community came to be. For the people of Abraham and others, they were sent out to many different places by God, among those of other tribes and nations. The tradition then was that there were local gods and local deities who were worshiped only in particular locations. But the God of Abraham was a jealous God and wanted them to worship only this God, not the god of local places but indeed the Maker of all Creation. God sends Abraham and others out into the world. And they are reminded that God goes with them. The Ark of the Covenant was built during the exodus holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments. And it came to represent the presence of God. So even if they went into places where false gods were worshipped by the locals, their God was with them. And, wherever they went.

So, the readings this morning, express a different perspective from that. Chapter 56 marks the opening chapter of what we call third Isaiah. The third writer of this book. Because the book spans a multitude of centuries and must have had different offers. But, just before this, in Chapter 55, there's a bridge to this new section. And the writer there says, "You shall call nations that you do not know. And nations that do not know you, shall run to you because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel". And I find when I read the phrase, nations that you do not know, it gives me a sense of, not only that moment in time but of the future, of what is yet to come. God will welcome those

of other nations in the future, as well. So, in today's reading, Isaiah is making a theological statement about the relationship between human and divine action.

As one scholar argued, on the one hand, God acts for good in the world even when humans fail to do what is right and delivers those in exile from Babylon despite their shortcomings. But there is more. We find God not only wants them to be more faithful but God wants to open the door wider--to a wider social order and to maintain justice and do what is right. This change is not to be understood as punishment for times of being unfaithful but of a desire to widen the circle. Isaiah here is saying something new--that foreigners, outsiders who want to worship the god of the Hebrew people, should be included. They were expected to worship God as they did. And to honor the law. It's helpful to note though, that this part of Isaiah was written when those in exile were returning to Jerusalem in the late 5th century BCE. And, as they returned home, some argued for making the community very narrow along ethnic lines. One scholar says though, don't be too quick to criticize this, understand the context. The survivors that returned were part of a small and vulnerable community and strict enforcement of boundaries might help them survive. For there was the fear that such a small community could be weakened if outsiders were allowed in.

Not all of the prophets would agree with Isaiah. Prophets such as Nehemiah appeal to the laws from Deuteronomy as proof that they should continue to exclude non-Jews including eunuchs. Isaiah's inclusion of these marginalized groups, however, is not just a token thing. The writer envisioned full participation of these people in the worshipping community and, I think the theme of widening the circle runs throughout the lectionary readings this morning.

The Gospel reading from Matthew is about a Canaanite woman, a foreigner, who approaches Jesus about healing her daughter. And Jesus ignores her at first. Saying bluntly, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." But in their story, something changes. And Jesus calls her one of the faithful. And it occurred to me, maybe the change of heart was intentionally framed by the Gospel writer to reflect this change in tradition. For Jesus is portrayed, at first, as one who thinks of narrow conceptions of the boundaries of God. But maybe the change of mind was included to make that very point. Then there's the story of the Ethiopian eunuch that occurs just before the chapter on Paul's conversion. The eunuch had been sitting in a chariot reading the words of whom else, but Isaiah. And Philip is sent by an angel from Sumeria, another group of people who were not considered faithful, to meet with him. And he does and he shares the good news. And by his own request the eunuch is baptized. Philip willingly fulfills his request. It reflects the words of Isaiah, desiring to widen the circle. And I found myself thinking of all the images from Isaiah that echo through Advent--preparing for the coming of Jesus--that not only speak to the restoration of Israel from exile but a time that brings peace to the whole world. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For unto us a child has been born, a son given. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace. A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse and the earth will be full of the knowledge of God. Nations shall inquire of them. And then arise, shine, for your light has come. Nations shall come to your light, and those from Sheba and Midian shall come bringing gold and frankincense as they proclaim praise of the Lord. The references of the coming of the one who will usher in a time of restoration and peace are woven throughout all of our Advent readings. And they speak of peace more than just to those who have been exiled but for a time and nations not yet known.

The morning reading from Romans touches on similar issues. Paul's ministry took him out of Jerusalem and the Roman occupation into different cultures and people from Rome to Corinth and Ephesus to Philippi. He meets up with all kinds of people, with all kinds of perspectives in worship. Paul had been a persecutor of the Jews who had followed the way originally. But after his conversion he came to realize that Jesus came not only for his immediate brothers and sisters of the faith, but for all people. But like Isaiah, there are others who do not agree, and Paul is

criticized by those who don't want him to invite others into the worshipping community. And, as I said earlier, one reason may have been was they thought it was a statement that God was rejecting them but that's not Paul's reasoning. For him, it means that they should be welcoming all people. So that is the power of today's passage, for me. Paul saw Jesus as one who came to bring peace for all, to bring new life and to bring hope; to include everyone in the circle. He was considered a radical thinker, someone who drew outside the lines. But he clearly yearned for people of all different nationalities to come together in peace. He had a vision that if we could all worship together and work together and serve together, we could bring about the kingdom. And that, for me, is the power of today's passages, a vision of a world where differences do not become barriers, that judgment or fear are not our first reactions, that our desire should be to find common ground, not to seek out where to draw lines in the sand. This does not mean we all have to be the same. It does not mean we tolerate any behavior. Rather, it is a yearning for peace. Seeking healing and peace in the midst of these tumultuous times is something that calls us to open our hearts and minds. And to be willing to expand the vision of who is in and who is out, who matters, and who does not. To commit ourselves to understanding how we, even those who believe that Jesus is Lord, that we also struggle with the reality that people who are of a different color should be treated equal, but in our culture, we struggle with that.

So we are challenged to be open and welcoming not only for those like us but those who seem different. To be like Isaiah who invites outsiders to become a part of the circle where all are welcome. All are welcome. This Friday I received an email from Jim Hacking who's an immigration lawyer and I might add a Presbyterian and he's spoken here about such issues. And on his website or through his email, he shared a story, which felt like a parable to me, of the call of Paul to widen the circle. He said many employees in our offices are immigrants themselves. They bring a unique perspective to their work that helps them understand what our clients are going through. And they also tell us about customs and the amazing food from their home country. If you've been to our office you have probably met Marwin, our client coordinator, who is also a great cook. She makes a wonderful dolma dish. Dolma is a mixture of lamb, rice, tomato sauce, garlic, and onions rolled inside of grape leaves or stuffed in other vegetables, like green peppers or squash. She said in Iraq, dolma is normally served with bread and a yogurt-cucumber salad. But that isn't what makes dolma so special. She told me that the significance of dolma in Iraq is that despite cultural, religious, or ethnic differences, all Iraqis would join together and sit around the table when there was dolma to be eaten. And that's something, he said, you don't hear of all the time.

We especially are struggling in this time with being welcoming. And we are too easily willing to exclude people who are not like ourselves. Too many of us have a tendency to look down on people with different religious, political, or cultural views than our own. But that's not a good way to be. No matter what, we need to unite, to come together despite our differences, and to consider that if someone doesn't think or believe like we do, they still deserve to be treated with kindness and respect. Because in the end, we are all still human. We all belong to the same world and we all have our own personal challenges. So, he closed by saying, "I think we can learn a lesson from those who willingly unite around a good dolmade dish. Look for the good in others instead of what's different. You may be surprised with how many amazing people you will meet, even if they don't look like or think like you do. You may learn something about others. And in so doing, you may learn about yourself." And he closed it by saying, "Best, Jim." I think Jim is right. We should give it our best too. We should live our faith tempered by the motto "all are welcome" just as it says at our sign at Taylor and Adams. For, if God says all are welcome, shouldn't we do the same? Amen.