

11 Pentecost, Proper 15, Yr. A

August 16, 2020

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8, Psalm 67, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32,

Matthew 15:10-28

There are some Sundays when it's hard to find the common thread in the readings. That's certainly not the case this week, because all of the readings, including the psalm are about inclusivity. I remember hearing a bishop (not ours) say that he was really tired of hearing about inclusivity. Well, I think it's safe to say that God isn't tired of it, even though we humans really struggle with it.

Desmond Tutu, in his book, *God Has A Dream*, says this: "I have a dream," says God. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing...My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family....My family." And then he goes on to say, "In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslims and Christians, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian – all belong." He could have been reading or re-writing this morning's scriptures.

Let's look at them one at a time. First some background to the Isaiah reading: The Jews who had been exiled to Babylon have returned. You'll remember that when the Babylonians defeated the Jews, they took anyone they thought was important – perhaps wealthy or influential or a member of the intelligentsia – into exile. Everyone who didn't fall into one of those categories was left behind. Now the exiles are back. And, unlike the stability and plenty they had found in Babylon, they are now in a society that never really recovered from that defeat. The ones who had been left behind had been scavenging for a living these many years and they resented the return of these “uppity exiles” who, in turn were, I'm sure, appalled at what they found – a society in disarray, poverty, even people who had moved into the homes the exiles left behind. There was a third group as well, non-Jews and foreigners who had landed in this unstable country. Probably everyone was wondering: NOW WHAT? How put this society back together? Who will decide? And perhaps the big question, the one that is still with us: WHO IS IN and WHO IS OUT? That question seems to be always with us.

Isaiah has an answer to that question. Who is in? Who belongs? And the answer has nothing to do with all our usual divisions. Instead, he says, everyone is in (including those you call foreigners) who join themselves to the Lord, who love the name of the Lord, who keep the Sabbath and the covenant. No exclusion based on all the usual

markers. Just a requirement to live in a certain way. And that way was fleshed out at the very beginning of Isaiah in Chapter 1: it was to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow, in other words to care for all those vulnerable ones. Those who live that way will find that their sacrifices will be accepted and my house shall be a house of prayer for ALL peoples. So, behavior mattered above all else. When I was in Texas, it was very common to hear people say that in order to be saved, to be a true Christian, a person needed to say, Jesus Christ is my personal savior. But when the occasion was right I would remind them that Jesus himself said that it was not those who said, "LORD, LORD" but those who did the will of his Father. Same thing here.

There's a theme of universality here. It goes all the way back to God's appearance to Abraham when he told them that ALL the families of the earth would be blessed. You hear the same thing in the psalm. The word "all" appears five times in those seven verses: all peoples, all nations. That all may know God's ways, that all may praise God, that all are judged and guided, that all may finally figure out who God is and stand in awe of him.

Then take a look at Romans. We've been reading this letter for several weeks. And what we're hearing is Paul's concern about his fellow Jews. He wants them to follow Jesus, but he's clear that, even if they don't, they are not rejected. Christians wanted to argue that now THEY were

the chosen ones, that THEY had superseded the Jews. That now they were the IN group and the Jews were OUT. No way, says Paul. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, which means that the Jews are safe in God's promise.

And finally, in the Gospel, there's that conversation between Jesus and the outsider, the Canaanite woman, which is resolved when Jesus recognizes her great faith and heals her daughter. But there's also that earlier conversation with the Pharisees who are worried about ritual defilement, about washing hands, about keeping those rules that defined who was in and who was out. Like Isaiah, Jesus is more worried about behavior – it's not what you eat, it's how you behave, and how you behave reflects what's in your heart. What you eat is irrelevant.

I wish I could say that we had gotten past all the ways in which we exclude and fragment and divide. But I think we still are very much in that struggle. Anti-Semitism has raised its ugly head once again. One would think that after the Holocaust that would never happen, but here it is. And even more frightening is the white supremacist movement. I read an article by Russell Moore who is a leader in the Southern Baptist Convention. He pointed out that only two things made Jesus angry. One was religious hypocrisy and the other was a racial supremacist ideology. A case in point would be those religious leaders who were judging who was worthy to be included in the Kingdom of God. Moore argues out that this is important for us now

because many of those advocating for white supremacy claim to do so in the name of Jesus Christ. He strongly disagrees and says that white supremacy not only attacks our society and the ideals of our nation, but it attacks the image of Christ in every person.

It's been said that we live in an age of anxiety. Anxiety caused by changing demographics and technological disruption. People feel unconnected, they don't trust institutions, many have no compelling religion to give them a sense of meaning and purpose. Some of that anxiety is legitimate - all we have to do is look at covid or unemployment. But that anxiety can be addressed or it can be exploited. We can be tempted to feel a sense of relief when a scapegoat can be named – perhaps we can blame all our problems on the migrants, or people in this country of a different color or a non-Christian religion, or maybe it's those coastal elites or the globalists who are secretly working to control society. Do you hear the echo here of the Nazi propaganda blaming the problems of the German people on Jewish bankers?

Insiders/outsideers. It starts early, doesn't it? One person I read talked about the different reading groups in kindergarten. In his case, there were the pigeons and the eagles. Trust me, he said, the pigeons were not reading *War and Peace*.

We divide in many ways. By class, by wealth, by race, by gender, by talent, by education, by religion. The list could go on, I'm sure. But I'd like to make a suggestion. I'm

guessing that we can all understand this intellectually. But I wonder if it sinks in better if we can think of a time when it was an actual experience. I think we've all had those experiences of being excluded, if not in the reading group, perhaps in the Junior High lunch room. I am sure I mentioned before about being with my Peace Corps daughter in Lesotho, and being the only white faces we had seen in the capital city. Being the Other. But that trip was also memorable for other things and for the feeling that we were truly outsiders – that there might be rules, but we didn't know what they were and that we would have no recourse if they weren't followed. I wouldn't have to go that far. I remember being asked to do a funeral but when I arrived, I wasn't greeted, introduced, or acknowledged in any way. An excluded outsider, perhaps one there to perform a necessary service, but nothing else.

For a long time, I have been thinking that we must choose between two poles: between love on the one hand and fear for our safety on the other. But it occurred to me when writing this sermon that that's incorrect. In the scripture it says that perfect love casts out fear. But here's an additional thought. That love in the sense of recognition of connection and responsibility is what, in the end, will conquer fear. There would be no need for fear in a society characterized by love. It reminds me of the psalm from last week which says that in the kingdom

righteousness and peace have kissed. Righteousness,
justice, love – that's what will result in peace. Amen.