

Thus Says the Lord

Isaiah 56:1-8

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Grace and peace to you. I bring greetings today from the First Church of Christ in Suffield where I have been serving as resident seminarian, and Yale Divinity school where I am in my final year of study!

It is a joy to be here today with you celebrating your response to the call of the Gospel to be an open and affirming church.

And I want to thank my dear friend, the Rev Erica Avena, for the invitation to be here today. I am confident that this congregation has benefited greatly from her steadfast leadership and wisdom.

I did not grow up in an open and affirming church, family or community and as a gay man, and so for years I had internalized the voices around me that said I didn't belong in church or in ministry. It is a dream come true for me to be in seminary and doing the work of ministry.

But as it took some time for me to live into my calling, I do come to ministry as a second career, having spent many years in the corporate world. Part of that time was spent in what was then an emerging discipline called "project management" – maybe some of you are familiar with this. In setting up to work on a project or a committee – there is a critically important document called the "charter" – the charter contains the words that define our purpose, our priorities, the culture the team wishes to create and most importantly – defines what the scope of the work is and when the work ends. When you come to a crossroads, when there are questions, the response is always – refer back to the charter, the answers are there.

Our scripture today, found in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, is, for us in our efforts to be open and affirming - our charter. Let's take a look at what's happening here...

The book of Isaiah is actually three books in one. The book spans a long time period and therefore we can assume it has multiple authors who I will refer to simply as "the prophet". They all build on the prophecies of Isaiah himself and the book tells the story of God's elect – the Israelites. The First section, or first Isaiah, is before the Israelites are exiled to Babylon, part two is during the exile and then – part three, which begins with our reading today is after the return from exile.

We often hear Isaiah read at advent – particularly from that second part of the book where the prophet speaks to a weary and exiled people – comfort, comfort my people! Second Isaiah is filled with hopeful promises of a post exile Israel where all is restored and the people live in harmony. In our current times, I can't help but think of the word quarantine every time I read exile and these words have special meaning for us today.

So the Israelites return from exile and despite all the promises made, guess what? Life isn't so perfect. In a time when they should be rejoicing and working together - they are arguing. For all of the ways life has changed since antiquity – it seems human behavior hasn't changed all that much and so we continue to look to our sacred text for wisdom.

Like us emerging from the pandemic - they are living in the in-between – between what was and what is yet to be – Jerusalem and... the New Jerusalem. And what exactly are they arguing about? They have different opinions on the question of “who belongs.” They are even trying to decide who among them is entitled to all that comfort that was promised in the earlier chapters. You see - the so-called “important people”- the wealthy and those with status were the ones sent to exile – and so they are creating an ‘in group’ – a group that they believe should have exclusive access to the blessings of God and the temple.

And that’s where we find ourselves in today’s text that begins – “Thus Says the Lord” - what follows is a radical, life changing word from the Lord delivered by the prophet to the people. The people are arguing over tradition and outward demonstrations of faith like sacrifice and temple access and then the Lord speaks a new word.

The prophet tells them God is a God of immeasurable generosity – and that instead of all this division they must do justice, they must keep the sabbath and they must reflect God’s loving kindness –Thus says the Lord – who is in and who is out is now radically redefined.

The word of the Lord isn’t “here’s how people should change” to be accepted – it’s not about ethnicity, nationality, what we’ve defined as race – or even gender identity. So I ask churches – when we say our invitation is – come as you are! Do we mean it? Or do we mean – come... and be like we are. Refer back to the charter – a house of prayer for all people! I believe we must examine ourselves in the ways that we “other” those who are not like us. This new word is a command to *do* justice. For us today, we are called as individuals and communities to look deeply at ourselves, to find the ways that we continue to create foreigners and outcasts- the ways we uphold the idea of an in group - instead of uniting in our worship. The prophet commands them to “keep the sabbath”. That might sound like he’s supporting those that are relying on rituals - but just a few pages forward in chapter 58 the prophet defines what it means to keep the sabbath – “to loose the chains of injustice, to set the oppressed free, to share your food with the hungry, to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, to clothe the naked..”

We might be tempted to think the Old Testament is only about the redemption of Israel – but it’s right here – God has been bringing the outcasts into the fold all along. What we have here is a picture of God’s expanding kingdom - a family, a nation, many nations. The end of this work? We pray it every week - Thy kingdom come.

So the challenge for us is to be a people who participate in God’s work of gathering in ALL people.

The words of the Lord, delivered by the prophet include the eunuchs – those we might call ‘gender non-conforming’. –Jesus said, some are made eunuchs, some are born that way. Remember the story of Phillip meeting the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert? He’s reading and in the chariot. He’s reading Isaiah! and he says to Phillip – who can explain this to me and Phillip says, I will, it’s all here in our charter. To the eunuchs you will be given an everlasting name – the promise of a legacy. A radical new word.

And the prophet’s words – they not only are an open invitation – but they are about full inclusion – not a junior membership, not an ‘olive branch’ – but full and equal status.

We think about inclusion in big terms on a day like today and all the ways we divide people into in groups and out groups - but it is no coincidence that today is closely aligned with the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, when a group of LGBT plus persons said, "no more". The commemoration of the Stonewall riots two years later was the very first Pride parade. Today, there are voices all around still trying to define – and legislate - who belongs – who belongs on a sports team, who belongs using a bathroom, who belongs in a voting booth, who belongs in the act of fostering and adopting children, who belongs in a house of worship, even debating who belongs at the Lord's table. The Human Rights Campaign recently stated that 2021 is a record breaking year for anti- LGBT legislation – and we are on pace to "more than double" the record for violence against trans individuals set last year.

I recently participated in an LGBT+ sensitivity training and I was asked why I do that kind of work. - I said, few of us would hesitate to learn CPR if we knew we would be called upon to save a life. Yes, things are better –but LGBT youth continue to be rejected by their families – 40% of the homeless youth population is LGBT. LGBT young people are over 8 times more likely to attempt to end their lives. YET, the studies have shown, the presence of just one accepting adult, just one accepting space (like this one) can mean the difference between life and death for a young person struggling with their sexuality or their gender. And so, it matters not only what we as individuals do -but it matters what our institutions say and do.

Church, our charter is clear - keep justice and do righteousness – participate in the work of bringing in all the nations.

A few summers ago I was working with a suburban church in an LGBT workshop. Their denomination is wrestling with what it means to be a house of prayer for ALL people as laid out in our text. An elderly gentleman walked in – bent over with age, he hung on to his walker and his wife to navigate to a seat. The minister looked at me and shrugged – not a part of this congregation he told me. As we introduced ourselves this man shared a story, decades earlier two of his children came to him and said I am gay. He told them to leave and to change their names so no one would affiliate them with him. Did they know the promise? "A new and everlasting name I will give you says the Lord". But then as tears filled his eyes- and those of everyone present, he talked of *his* new Jerusalem, of a family once in exile, now restored, of loving sons in law and grandchildren and making up for years needlessly lost.

Today, we celebrate the work of being open and affirming, we celebrate the progress we have made toward the vision laid out in Isaiah – but, like the ancient Israelites, we live in the in-between so in these times when we are still so far from recognizing the value in each and every life, can we listen for a new word from God? Can we hear it in the voices of those still on the margins? The oppressed?

And can we, the people of God, use our voices to speak a new word to the world. Let's infuse our communities with words of love and life and an enthusiastic and inclusive welcome. And when asked, "who belongs?" we can deliver this word, again and again and say – "all people" –for Thus Says the lord. Amen.

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