

Pentecost 10, August 17, 2014

For All People

Isaiah 56:1, 6–8



Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. . . .”⁶ “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, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—⁷ 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.”⁸ The Lord GOD, who

gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”

Introduction:

Dear friends in Christ!

Have you ever wondered why it is that we have a church building? And whose is it supposed to be? And perhaps an even deeper question, why is it that we do have a congregation, a group of people that gathers on a weekly basis?

The answer is set in the Old Testament reading for today of Isaiah chapter 56, that “Salvation will come” and God’s “deliverance be revealed.” That’s why. But that it is not only for those who are saved, or born in the church already, but even for what we could consider strangers, people of different race, color and social status. So that they too might find God’s grace, forgiveness and salvation.

It might shock us to know that what we call ours, our congregation, our building, is the tool God uses to reach out to strangers and even welcome them. We may have trouble welcoming strangers though—welcoming strangers into God’s kingdom. But in our text today, God equips us to do just that by reminding us that our God is a God for all people, not just for a selected remnant of the same cultural, social and religious background.

I. Strangers were not welcome in Isaiah’s day either, especially in the temple and the festival gatherings.

And for that we are reminded again what the people of old did and how God treated them. As you see, the people of Judah and Jerusalem, actually the whole people of Israel, took pride in being God’s chosen people. They were descendants of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and as such thought of themselves superior to any other race.

Yes it was true, they were heirs to the land God had promised Abraham, the land Joshua conquered and David secured, but there was a purpose, God told Abraham: “...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:3b)

Yet the Israelites, instead of becoming a blessing to others, took a specific prohibition against welcoming Moabites and Ammonites at festivals and seemed to have expanded it to ban everyone else for fear of contamination, but forgetting that they too, the strangers, might be blessed by God.

The only way for a foreigner to be welcomed was to become an Israelite first, through circumcision and obedience to the ceremonial laws. The question though is, is that the only way that God will bless them? How about today?

II. While we may not be willing to admit it, strangers often may not feel welcome in our congregations.

No one wants our church to be unfriendly, and most people would probably say we are a very friendly congregation. After all, people stick around to visit with one another long after the service is over, or at least a good number does. And no one can deny that, for we are very welcoming to our friends in church, especially when we have so much in common. But what about those who are not like us? Who are on the outside looking in? How would they view our church?

So often we are seen as being an exclusive club. Not because of something we do or say, but because of what we don't do and don't say, in other words we don't share the excitement of our faith, or at least the good part. I think that we more often than not share that which we don't like or that which we didn't agree with or that which has upset us. Now of course we are allowed to speak and talk about things, but if all we do is tell of the bad, and don't talk about the positives or how God's word is changing us, then we are in trouble, for we then give the appearance of being a club or a closed circle. And the trouble I'm talking about is that what we also portray is a rejection from God. And I'm not talking about those who make sure they are ignored, but those who we ignore.

So, do we make every effort to welcome visitors, and do we make every effort to speak to the "foreigners" in our church?

Or do they see us being friendly to our friends, leaving them feeling ignored and rejected, not just by our church, but, so it appears, by God?

III. Our Old Testament Reading for today from Isaiah 56 clearly shows that our God is God for all people.

Now, in the Old Testament, especially in our reading from Isaiah 56, the foreigners did not simply wander in; it was the Lord who brought them into his temple. Hear once more what verse 7 tells us: "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." (v 7).

The temple was more than a building; it was the place where the Lord poured out his grace and forgiveness to his chosen people through their sacrifices and offerings, and so it is even today.

This forgiveness and grace would not be limited to a few, but would be opened up to all people, even those formerly not part of his chosen people. And these "foreigners" will respond and their response would be very noticeable. They would respond by faith, trusting in the Lord's promises to them, and "join themselves to the Lord" (v 6). And more in faith will also obey the Lord's command and will become his servants.

Now, do you think that that can happen today? I do believe so. If we are not willing to serve God, those who are His redeemed already, those who have experienced God's love and grace and more those who have belonged to this place for a long time, God will raise a new generation replacing the ones who don't want to serve, that's for sure. And God will do so because He is The Lord of all people.

Now, wouldn't it be easier that others will come and take our place, so that we don't have to work and serve any more? That would be, wouldn't it. But God asks us different, hear now what the Prophet tells us also in the same chapter 56: "Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness.... Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil." (Vs. 1-2) All of this God's commands including the service to His Kingdom and His Church, after all that's what the Third Commandment calls us to do. And by doing so we do work for an inclusive congregation welcoming the "foreigners" as well.

IV. Fast-forward about 700 years—and 2,700 years—and we see this prophecy being fulfilled.

God's intention of welcoming the "foreigners" in His Kingdom is seen in reality in the practice of Jesus' ministry, as we read in our Gospel lessons for today, where Jesus grants the request of a "foreigner," a Canaanite woman who trusted in him.

Just as Jesus said in John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Notice that Jesus say "the world" not just certain people, but "whoever."

Later in the same book of John, Jesus states that he has other sheep who are not of this fold (Jn 10:16) who "must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Jesus says "So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

The truth is that there are still others who are outside of being recognized as his people. Those he would yet bring to himself, and He is sending us to do so, to bring and welcome them. For God, through Jesus, is the Lord for all people. God brings us to his house to receive the forgiveness won for us by Christ on the cross.

God gives us joy in knowing that Jesus has done it all, and we are his forgiven sons and daughters. But God brings others too, into his house to receive the same forgiveness and grace won by Christ on the cross; it's not just for us to be his new chosen people, but for all he calls.

It is God working through his Word and his people to bring people to his house, and he calls us to welcome them! He uses each of us to be his instrument to invite and encourage those around us who are not part of his new chosen people, the Church, to join us in learning about our Savior.

He exhorts us to remember that we were once on the outside looking in—until he claimed us as his own, creating that trust in his promises that we have.

He encourages us to be welcoming of others as they hear more about Jesus as well. Those who are different from us those, the immigrants from all over the world, the first nation community, those of different social and economical status in Grande Prairie, we need to welcome them.

Conclusion:

Through Jesus, God did the unexpected in our lives. He rescued us, strangers because of our sins, from eternal death caused by those very sins. He made us his own. Our God is not a God for those who think they are good enough or are trying hard. Our God is a God who loves even the worst sinners in his Son. Our God is a God for all people giving us this congregation and this building for His purposes.

As we close this meditation I'm reminded of the words of 1 Kings 8:41-43 that say: "Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far

country for your name's sake ⁴² (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays towards this house, ⁴³ hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.”

In His name, amen.