

A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES  
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on August 20, 2023

Texts: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 & Matthew 15:10-28

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.

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.

Matthew 15:10-28

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then 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 he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He 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." He 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 for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

**B**oth readings today make the same basic point: belonging to God's people doesn't depend on superficial qualities. It depends on whether a person truly lives their life in relation to God. Which opens the door to everyone—even those who are seen as outsiders and those who are considered unworthy.

The first reading deals with the law and how it relates to the question of belonging. Isaiah talks about "foreigners" and lays out a vision of Israel where anyone can be part of the community because membership doesn't depend on your culture, your background, or anything like that. It depends on whether you keep the law in a way that's sincere and genuine. Speaking on God's behalf, Isaiah says, "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." In other words, if you live like one of God's people, you are one of God's people, regardless of where you come from.

The second reading also deals with the law and how it relates to the question of belonging, but the issue at hand is a little bit different. After the hand-washing episode, where the Pharisees got all worked up about the disciples not keeping the letter of the law, Jesus calls a crowd together and says, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." In other words, being a Jew isn't about how precisely you follow the rules. It's about what kind of person you are. God doesn't care about your personal hygiene. God cares about what's in your heart, good intentions or bad, and how you demonstrate them in your daily living. So again, if you live like one of God's people, you are one of God's people, even if you've got some dirt under your nails.

So both Isaiah and Jesus present a very broad and inclusive vision of God's people. It's a vision that erased the lines that separated people in both of their days—the line between Jew and Gentile, the line between clean and

unclean, the line between insider and outsider. Unfortunately it's a vision that's hard to embrace because the lines that separate groups of people, whether they're based on religion or politics or whatever, define so much about how we see ourselves and each other. For better or worse, they tell us who we are and where we stand.

In fact, even Jesus had a moment when he struggled to see someone who was different than him simply for who she was—which is what the second half of the second reading is about. It's about an encounter Jesus has with a Canaanite woman, whose persistence helps him live up to his own vision. So let's take a look.

**A**fter he finishes talking to the crowd in the first half of the reading, Jesus leaves that place and goes to the district of Tyre and Sidon. These were Roman ports on the Mediterranean coast, way up north beyond Galilee, in Gentile territory. As soon as he arrives, a local woman starts shouting at him and asking him to heal her daughter, who's being tormented by a demon. And the reason she's shouting is probably because she's trying to keep her distance. She knows there's a line between herself and Jesus that she's not supposed to cross. In fact, there's more than one line. The two of them are separated not only by the fact that he's a Jew and she's a Gentile, but also by the fact that he's a man and she's a woman.

So she's really stepping out of line here and risking public condemnation in order to get help for her daughter, which tells you how desperate she is. And how does Jesus respond? Does he take pity on her? Is he moved by her plight? No. He completely ignores her and tells the disciples he was sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, she's not his problem because she's an outsider. Pretty harsh. But that's not all. Instead of going away quietly, the woman falls on her knees and says, "Lord, help me." She's begging him, and he tells her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words, her daughter's life isn't worth his time.

Here, it's tempting to try and soften Jesus words or explain them away. But I think Matthew presents him this way on purpose, and the reason why has to do with what was going on historically in Matthew's community when the gospel was written sometime near the end of the first century.

At that point, Matthew and his fellow believers were going through basically a messy divorce—at least from their perspective. They were still somewhat connected to the local synagogue, but they were in the process of separating because their beliefs had grown apart. So they were going from being part of the Jewish world to being part of the Gentile world, and they were becoming more and more of a mixed group—Jews and Gentiles thrown in together. Which means the issue of inclusivity was a very live issue for them. How do we welcome non-Jews into our congregation and make it work? How do we see past the lines that have defined us for so long? How do we live up to Isaiah's vision of a house of prayer, not just for one people, but for all peoples?

These were the things the people in Matthew's church were trying to figure out—because they didn't have a choice. Going back to the synagogue was not an option. That door was shut. The only way forward was to build a new kind of community and live together with people they had always seen as "other," and that's not easy. It takes constant effort, and there's always the danger of falling back into old ways of thinking and becoming divided again.

**S**o listen to this story again, and this time hear how it reflects the historical situation

Matthew was facing. One day Jesus finds himself in Gentile territory, where he runs into a local woman, who wants him to widen the scope his ministry and heal her daughter. At first he won't even speak to her; he wants to maintain the boundary between Jews and non-Jews. But as she engages with him, he comes to see that she's a person of genuine faith, and based on that recognition, he opens his heart to her.

When you hear it like that, this story is both a warning and a roadmap. Matthew is telling his audience if Jesus could fall into this us/them

kind of mentality then so can they. At the same time, he's telling them the way to stay out of that trap is to recognize their common need for healing and mercy, goodness and grace; and their common belief that the source of these things is Jesus. As long as they focus on that, and not their differences, nothing will be able to come between them.

I think those are both vital lessons, not just for churches in the first century, but for churches in the twenty-first century, as well. Isaiah gives us a vision of what we're supposed to be—a house of prayer for all people.

But it's up to us, Matthew is saying, to realize that vision. It's up to us to be a place where anyone can come and worship God and feel like they belong—which doesn't happen just because there's a sign out front that says, "All are welcome." It happens because churches are intentional about creating a culture of hospitality and welcome. It happens because churches resist the temptation to turn inward and become some sort of private club. It happens because churches remember we're not here to serve ourselves; we're here to serve the world, and we do that by sharing God's love with all. Amen.