

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8   Bill Uetricht   12 Pentecost   8.17.23

Before Bev and I moved here, we lived in Toledo where I served a wonderful congregation with great people. At one point in our ministry there, a large group of folks from another Lutheran congregation showed up at our place. They were great people, too, but they served as a threat to some folks. For a few members of the church, they became known as the “Trinity People.” And that was no compliment. Although the *Trinity people* were good folks, were caring, energetic, and quite gifted, they were foreigners. They were a threat.

History is replete with examples of foreigners who were thought to pose a great threat. Honestly, when things go bad in a culture, when the economy gets tough, when the culture itself is at a point of transition, foreigners are often seen as a threat. Sometimes they are even seen as a threat when things are going well. The “Trinity People” brought so many gifts to our congregation, contributed so much life. Our life together was more vibrant than it had ever been in my time there, but these foreigners were still a threat. One person mentioned that I was paying more attention to those foreign folks than I was to them.

Foreigners are the topic for today. Our theme for today “Does All Really Mean All?” is the right question as we confront Isaiah and Matthew. We begin with Isaiah.

Truthfully, Isaiah’s writing today is quite remarkable in terms of its vision. This truly is evolved religion. Isaiah has God saying, “Maintain justice, and do what is right, because God’s deliverance is on its way.” It’s as if the nearness of God and God’s action are compelling Israel to live out who God is and who they are in light of who God is. It’s almost an Advent message—God is near, so live like it.

And what does just or righteous living look like considering the nearness of God. According to Isaiah, it is a matter of welcoming the

foreigner, the excluded. In verses we don't get in today's reading, God says, "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people,' and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'" Wow! Once excluded people from the temple are now said to be included, welcomed, able to contribute fully. The sexually different, the foreigners should not consider themselves left out. Their gifts will be received.

Isaiah continues in what is our text for today: "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord and minister to him, all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it, 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."

You see, it doesn't matter that they are foreigners. It doesn't matter if they have the right pedigree, come from the right ethnic background, look like us, speak the same language that we do. What matters is that they practice the faith.

Something to know about the portion of Isaiah from which comes today's reading is that it was likely written after the Babylonian exile, the time when many Israelites had to leave their homes. In fact, it probably was written after the time when some of those exiles came home. And while you would think that such a time would have been a time of great celebration and happiness, it was for many people a time of great disappointment. People had gone back home, and guess what? Home wasn't what they expected it to be. Home had been brutalized. Home meant devastated ruins.

Well, at one point—and this I believe is the timing for the part of Isaiah from which comes our first reading—the returned exiles, or more likely their kids and grandkids, and other folks started rebuilding the buildings, including the temple. And you know what happens when you

get new carpet and a new car. You get a little protective. Nobody is going to drink anything in this car. Everybody is going to take their shoes off when they walk in this place.

Now, I don't think that these were the issues for the Israelites. But what did happen was that as the nation started to rebuild, some folks thought that in order to protect the nation and its new emerging identity, it needed to establish stricter boundaries. I get this. In order to build on who you are, you need to *know* who you are; you need to understand your uniqueness. Sometimes as human beings we can't know who we are unless we know who we aren't. We aren't them.

Yes, the result of that kind of knowing can become a bit awkward. As people highlight their own identity, they can become rigid or naïve. Converts to religions often become pains in the backside because they are working so hard to establish who they are over against the whole world now. You just want to stick them with a needle and let the air come out.

As the nation started to rebuild, the rigid ones started showing up. And part of their rigidity had to do with foreigners. They are our problem, these folks were saying. And part of what they advocated for included strict regulations on marrying foreigners.

I suspect that the author of Isaiah is disagreeing with these folks, folks, who, by the way, show up in the Bible, too, in books like Ezra and Nehemiah. One of the great things about the Bible is that it is free to reflect disagreement in the community. The Bible is not one uniform view of life. It is a coming together of diverse perspectives, some of which are totally opposite to one another.

I think Third Isaiah, as the portion of Isaiah that we are reading from today is often called, reflects an opinion that this movement toward insularity, movement toward protecting ourselves, keeping us separated out from the foreigners is a bad move. Third Isaiah has a big

vision of a God whose house is meant to be a “house of prayer for all peoples.” For him, foreigners aren’t a problem. They are to be included. They help us become what we are meant to become. For me, then, Third Isaiah in many ways anticipates the ministry of Jesus.

As I was reflecting on all this this past week, it came to me that really foreigners (call them “the other”) has been the human issue from the very beginning. Do you know the Bible well enough to remember what the first consequence of human sin is in Genesis? Sibling rivalry. Cain kills Abel. This story about Cain and Abel is not a story about what happened once upon a time; it is a story about what happens all the time. And what happens all the time is that others are a threat to us, often a threat to our feeling good about ourselves, our feeling as if we have a place, our feeling as if we are loved. You know, love is like a pie. There is only so much of it to go around, so if others get more we won’t get that much. So, we must get rid of the other. We must keep foreigners in their place.

This, I think, is the human problem that has always existed. We are prone to insularity. We are prone to cut people down so that we can feel better about ourselves. We are prone to think that the problem is not us, but them. It is the human dilemma. And it is hard to get over.

But before you start feeling too bad about that realize that it wasn’t easy for Jesus to get over it either. This is what we discover in Matthew today. Matthew tells us of a woman, a foreign woman, a foreign woman who is part of a nation that was an ancient enemy of Israel who comes to Jesus to seek healing for her daughter. And we are told, Jesus won’t talk to her. She is other. She is a foreigner. He says to his disciples, “Tell her to go away. I was sent only to *my* people.”

Well, this woman must have read Third Isaiah. She won’t back down. She’s got a sick daughter. Jesus doesn’t seem to care. Using an

ethnic slur, he says, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food (the good stuff intended for Jews) and throw it to the dogs (you foreigners).”

Jesus is calling this woman a dog. But note. She doesn’t get offended. She’s too strong for offense. Yet she won’t give up. She is a mother with a sick child. And you know how mothers with sick children are. She’s like a dog with a bone, and she will get what she wants. And she does. And Jesus commends this foreign woman for her great faith.

It took Jesus a while to figure this stuff out. It takes all of us a while to figure it out. It is *the* human problem to think that love is a limited-quantity product. There’s only so much to go around, you know. That’s not true. When it comes to the love of God, there is enough to go around for all. After all, as Isaiah says, God is busy making his house a house of prayer for all peoples. Others are not threats. Your siblings are not threats. Foreigners are not threats. Immigrants are not threats. Muslims are not threats. Truthfully, they are not *them*; they are us. We all are us, us on a journey, on a pilgrimage to the house of God that we are seeking, and more importantly, the house that is seeking us.