

All Are Invited  
Isaiah 56:1-8, Matthew 15:21-28  
First Presbyterian Church  
August 20, 2017

### Introduction to the Readings

Because I am a pastor I get a good many cold calls from folks trying to interest me in a number of things: Sunday school curriculum and traveling dramatic performances and capital campaign consulting services. Well, since I have been in Hickory there has been one extremely persistent fellow who calls me from time to time... and his voice message is always the same: Pastor, this is “so and so” (his name happens to be Doug). “I am a missionary who travels around the country sharing a Biblical worldview. I will be coming to your area in January and would very much like to talk about coming to your church. Please call me back at...”

Well, I have called him back and have told him nicely that I am not interested... but as I said, he is persistent and the truth is that I really AM interested in hearing him share (what he calls) a “Biblical worldview”. Because the way I read the Bible... within the sixty six books that make up our Christian canon... there are many worldviews. You would expect this with a collection of writings that span thousands of years. And I think it is just wishful thinking to say that there is ONE Biblical worldview.

I tell you this because lurking in the background of this morning’s Scripture readings are two of those worldviews – one, we could say is a worldview of EXCLUSION (of US and THEM)... and the other, a worldview EXPANSION (of US welcoming, and even inviting THEM). And the amazing thing about the great tapestry of the Bible is that these seemingly contradictory worldviews are woven together with no apparent attempt to get rid of either. Ruth, for example... the woman of Moab... a foreigner... becomes the great-great grandmother of Israel’s greatest king... yet she lives in the same testament as Esther, the faithful Jew who saved HER people, God’s CHOSEN people. The Ninevites – a consummate evil empire – are given the chance to repent and be forgiven in the Book of Jonah which is only a few pages from Daniel, the story of a faithful Jew who refuses to bow to any God but the God of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The two lectionary readings assigned to this day happen to be strong threads in this wonderful Biblical tapestry... both of them are wrestling with this tension between exclusion and expansion. We read first from Isaiah 56.

### **Isaiah 56:1-8**

56Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. <sup>2</sup>Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

<sup>3</sup>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.”

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara K. Lundblad, “Crumbs and the Covenant”, printed in a 2009 edition of the newsletter of the Covenant Network.

<sup>4</sup>For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, <sup>5</sup>I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. <sup>6</sup>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— <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

### **Matthew 15:21-28**

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>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.” <sup>23</sup>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.” <sup>24</sup>He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” <sup>26</sup>He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup>She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

### Sermon<sup>2</sup>

Let’s begin this morning with a question. Do you remember the last time you felt decidedly uncomfortable somewhere? When was the last time you felt truly uncomfortable somewhere? Your first boy-girl dance in middle school? A blind date? Your spouse’s office Christmas party? Your child’s back-to-school night? The first day on a new job? Your first meal in the retirement community dining room? Usually, we feel uncomfortable either when we don’t know the people around us OR when we’re not sure where we fit in... not sure what we’re supposed to do. We’ve all been there, of course – feeling left out and alone... out of our element... maybe even unwelcome. And it’s a lousy feeling, isn’t it? SO lousy we usually do everything we can to avoid it.

So for a moment let’s imagine feeling that way at church... feeling uncomfortable and out of place... at church. This is probably hard for some of you... it is for me – church is one of the places we feel MOST comfortable... MOST at home. But here’s the thing: each and every week there are folks sitting in our pews... listening (hopefully) to our sermons... singing or just mouthing the hymns... they stand when we stand and sit when we sit... they go through the motions of worship... but they do not feel at home at church.

And then, as we know there are a whole-bunch of other people who are NOT here today... who have found other ways to spend their Sunday mornings... and one of the reasons they are not here is that they feel decidedly uncomfortable in a building like this one... doing the things we do... being with people like us.

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<sup>2</sup> This sermon is inspired by and follows closely the reflections of Dr. David Lose in his Workingpreacher.org essay from August 7, 2011.

So again... though it may be hard for us to imagine, a whole lot of people don't feel particularly welcome or wanted in church. No one sets out to make them feel that way... church folk don't intend to make others feel unwelcome... it just happens. The question is what can we do about it? Knowing this, what can we do?

Well, as you heard earlier, both of today's Bible passages are clear on one thing - that everyone is welcome in our congregations. Why? Well, not because it's politically correct... and not because it's the "Southern nice" thing to do. Everyone is welcome because *God says they are welcome!* Because GOD says they are welcome. Isaiah comes right out and names them as "foreigners". *No one* will be left out: the faithful and the foreigners, the insiders and the outcast, all who join themselves to the Lord, Isaiah promises, are invited and welcome to come together as one people.

And then in Matthew we have the quintessential insider/outsider story - a story which really explores this idea that that some are chosen and some are not. Keep in mind that in many ways Matthew is the most "Jewish" of the Gospels. In other words, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the Jewish messiah... that he is the fulfillment of prophecy, that he is righteous according to the law, that he is Moses' successor. And in that context, let's listen as one commentator helps us imagine the scene as Matthew pits the "insider" disciples against this "outsider" Canaanite woman: *Gathered in one corner are those familiar disciples, for Matthew they are the true blue representatives of the faithful lost sheep of Israel... now leaping into the fray like so many ravenous beasts, as it were... the self-appointed guarantors of the holy tradition... on their guard lest the mercies of God be wasted on the unworthy. Like a gang of watchdogs at the door they are about the checking of IDs and keeping out the non-pedigreed riffraff. On the other side of the gate stands this outsider, a woman no less, one lone representative of the dogs of religion, now become, as it were, a lost sheep... plaintively pleading for the mercy of the master shepherd. No English translation can capture the painful choral refrain... the dog's solo bleating cry: "Lord, have mercy,". "Get rid of her," the "lost-sheep chorus" barks back in reply.*<sup>3</sup>

Then, into this fray strides THE shepherd... who not only welcomes this newest and most unlikely of disciples... but praises her great faith! Yes, all are invited. ALL are welcome. Everyone. ALL.

I don't pretend to know all the reasons why people don't always feel welcome in church. But I know that some are embarrassed because they don't have the right address or the right clothes or the right car or the right education or the right skin color or sexual attraction. I know that all some folks know about the church is what they see on TV or read in the papers... which means we're all a part of the Religious Right... or are money-grubbing televangelists... or somehow participated in the cover up of the Roman Catholic sex abuse scandal.

I'm quite sure that some have never really understood all the things we say and do at church... and that it's all just a little too confusing and a lot intimidating to be in the midst of the "regulars" who seem to know what they're doing. Of course, some have had bad experiences in the church - as a child or a divorcee - and it's hard to ever feel comfortable again.

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<sup>3</sup> James Boyce in his commentary on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

And then there are lots of folks who can't figure out the whole biblical-story thing and how it squares with the findings of modern science. And finally, there are some folks who just have a hard time believing any church or minister would want the likes of them if they really knew the problems they have. I don't know all the reasons why people don't feel welcome... and I won't know unless I ask... we won't know unless we ask.

Which is what I want to BEGIN to do today... I want to start a conversation in our church by just asking you whether or not you feel comfortable here. Really... honestly... do you feel invited and welcome and accepted in this community of faith? If so, why? If not, why? You each have a slip of paper in your bulletin with some questions on it... or if you would prefer to pull out your device and email or text me your answer I welcome that. The contact info is in your bulletin. Don't worry about signing your name on the paper unless you just want to... but if you want your response to be anonymous you probably ought to use the paper. We're going to keep silence for a couple of minutes – which I know will drive some of you crazy... but we don't do near enough in worship. And when you are finished I invite you to put your paper in the offering plate.

So here's my challenge to you this week. Now that you have shared whether or not you feel invited and comfortable in our church, I encourage you to ask one other person... think of a person you know who is NOT involved in a church community. This should be someone with whom you can have an honest conversation... it may be one of your children, or a sibling, a next door neighbor or family friend... maybe an inactive member of our congregation – but find a time to ask someone who is not in church why... why they don't find it meaningful... are there things they just don't understand about who Christians are and what they do... what is their perception of Christians and the church. And then after that, ask them what (if anything) might make a difference for them... what might make church more interesting... worth getting out of bed for... more meaningful and worthwhile to them as they try to live in the world. Assume the role of a learner... be curious and not judgmental... and just listen. We're awful good at talking in the church (at least I am!)... It's high time we learn to listen.

Because here's the thing – the woman Jesus meets... and dismisses... and then learns from is first and foremost a person... a person with needs and concerns and hurts and interests. And the “great faith” she demonstrates is that she won't let herself... or her sick daughter... be dismissed. She is tenacious... she will not allow it!

But today in Hickory there are too many people who are used to being dismissed by the church and are NOT that tenacious. They assume (rightly or wrongly) that the church just isn't interested in them... and not being as tenacious as the woman with the sick daughter, they aren't interested in the church... it's not even on their radar screens. That's why it's our job to reach out and simply ask... just ask. Because who knows? They may have something important to teach us about this faith that we claim to know so well. Jesus himself learned something that day... he learned something about the purposes of God that he already knew so much about... and he responded by commending the woman's great faith. I can't help but believe that he would have us learn from her... and all those like her... as well. But we won't do that unless we ask. Amen.