

Welcoming Change

August 20, 2017

Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 15:10-28

This October will be the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation – a movement that dates its beginning from October 31, 1517, when the Catholic monk Martin Luther nailed his “95 Theses” to the door of the chapel in Wittenberg, Germany. These 95 statements were theological statements raising theological issues, including objections to then-current practices of the Roman Catholic Church – a focus was his objection to the practice of priests - selling indulgences (essentially pardons). This action by Luther precipitated an era of change in the Church – including the development of Protestant denominations. We will be talking more about the Reformation later this fall – there will be an ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation at SPASH on Sunday, October 29 which Bill Weinmann will be participating in. I will be in Colombia at that time, participating in some celebrations with the Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia – the Presbyterian Church in Colombia. So our own celebration will be on the first Sunday in November. Today I just want to remember one of the mottos of the Reformation which was *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* – which means ‘the Church reformed and always being reformed’ and we tend to add, “according to the Word of God and the call of God’s Spirit” – to remind ourselves that we believe it is God who calls and moves the Church to reform.

We need to remember that indeed, God has continually been working within God’s people – these days we tend to talk more about transformation than reformation when we are talking about God’s work in us. Sometimes we act as if there have been just a couple of big moments of change – maybe the Exodus and God giving the law; the life and ministry of Jesus, and the Reformation might be some of the big hinges in history we would identify. And when we approach the Bible from that perspective, we might not notice all the ways that God was calling people to change all along – through prophets in the Old Testament and through the apostles and disciples in the early church.

This passage in Isaiah 56 marks one of those moments, and it is an important passage. Just about the time I came here just over 11 years ago there was a cover story¹ in *The Christian Century* on this passage by a professor from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, which convinced me that the Isaiah passage is a really significant, and under-appreciated passage. I think that the Gospel passage is a similar passage in many ways.

¹ Frederick J. Gaiser, “At Ground Zero: Homosexuality and the message of Isaiah” *The Christian Century*, May 2, 2006 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2006-05/ground-zero>

So let me give a little background to the passage from Isaiah. It is the opening chapter in the section of Isaiah known as “Third Isaiah” – written as the people of Israel were returning from exile and discerning how to reconstitute themselves as a nation and as a body of faithful people. The Temple had been destroyed when Babylon had invaded. So the people were wondering, just as in the Reformation, what would worship look like? What would faithful living look like? Indeed, these are questions that many people are asking these days as well. We have often asked the question here, “How, then, shall we live?” That is, in light of our faith, or as we reflect on a certain passage, how might our living be shaped?

And the answers that come in this passage were, one might say, transformative. Earlier religious practice had focused on the Temple, purity, and ritual sacrifice. And there had been teachings, both in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy, that had excluded some people from worship at the Temple. Among those excluded were eunuchs – that is, men whose sexual organs had been damaged or were missing – and certain immigrants.

We are familiar with the teachings of Jesus that start out, “You have heard it said...” and continue on with “but I say to you” as he takes a teaching from the Old Testament and changes it. An example would be “ ‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” This shift in Isaiah 56 is equally profound, because the earlier teachings had prohibited eunuchs from even making an offering, and some immigrants weren’t allowed to attend worship. But in this passage, Isaiah says that eunuchs who have join in the faith practices of Israel will be full members of the community and God promises them a heritage greater than sons and daughters – a meaningful promise indeed to these who cannot have children. Immigrants, too, are welcomed – even given the possibility of serving as priests. The welcome to others is not skimpy or symbolic – it is a full welcome into the community of faith.

And there is really no mention of sacrifice here – what God asks instead is what – anyone notice? Act justly, do what is righteous, and keep the Sabbath. While Sabbath had been given as a commandment as far back as Genesis, and again with the Ten Commandments, it hadn’t really been stressed. But in this passage, keeping the Sabbath and living justly are what God asks for worship. God is asking for us to worship – to show our love for God – by the way we live our lives: following God’s own examples of keeping the Sabbath and seeking justice.

And this change is within the Old Testament – people are coming to a new understanding of what God wants from them within the Old Testament. This is very significant. God’s revelation and God’s reformation are both ongoing. It’s not “one and done” – and either God is changing (which is a difficult idea for some to consider), or peoples’ understanding of God is changing. And over at least the next two chapters, God and the prophet continue to expound a vision of religious practice centered in justice-seeking and Sabbath-keeping rather than fasting and sacrifice. An important dimension of this change is that the

religious life will be directly practiced by the people, instead of by the priests on behalf of the people. Finally, the other shift is that these changes are a move toward greater inclusivity. God is opting to move toward increased inclusivity rather than increased purity. And the people are called to undertake welcome as a spiritual practice.

With this as background, let's look at today's Gospel story, which is definitely NOT one of my favorites. These two episodes will also end up dealing with both purity and inclusion. In the first episode, Jesus is having a dispute with the Pharisees, one which seems to focus on questions of purity. Let me explain – much of “the Law” beyond the Ten Commandments was regulations concerning cleanliness or dietary regulations – and Jesus addresses each of these issues in this dispute. Earlier he and the Pharisees were having a discussion about the Law, and particularly about ritual hand-washing, and Jesus enlarges the conversation to include food. And he shifts the emphasis in faithfulness from purity to ethics – eating permitted foods (what goes into the mouth) is not as important as what you say to people (what comes out of the mouth). How we treat other people is more important than meeting purity standards. Again, the emphasis is on how we live our lives.

But then, in the second episode, Jesus seems to struggle with this a little himself. As one commentator has written, Jesus seems to be ‘caught with his compassion down.’ A Canaanite woman approaches him asking that he heal her daughter. The woman is an outsider on several levels: she is different ethnically (an indigenous Canaanite), she is a Gentile, she is a woman. Moreover, there is a demon in her daughter, and the woman fails to follow social norms which would require a woman to be reserved in public and to avoid talking with a man outside her family. She does not regard these barriers as insurmountable. But Jesus initially at least responds with all the prejudices of his time. His initial response is perhaps the worst: he ignores her. Jesus who treats each person before him with the most important gift, the gift of his attention, reduces her to a nonentity. It is the disciples who take notice of her, and they only do that to urge him to send her away. He comments at this point that he has come for the lost sheep of Israel. He doesn't even say it to her. She doesn't count. She is an outsider.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She kneels before him. She calls him Lord. She asks for help. And at this point he talks directly to her, but what does he say? “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” When he finally does speak to her, he is pointedly insulting. He dehumanizes her, calling her and her daughter ‘dogs.’ How are we to understand this? The Jesus who said to “love your enemies” is behaving about as badly as we can imagine. First, he treats her as a nonentity, then only elevates her to animal status. She is the one who shows us how to behave, not Jesus. She doesn't let his words define her. She pushes on, and turns his insult to her own benefit in the same kind of cleverness that Jesus often shows with the Pharisees. She doesn't try to change his perception of her, she engages him on his terms saying, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.” And, whereas he had ignored her and then castigated her, she recognizes him and acknowledges who he is, calling him Lord.

Is it that recognition that impresses him, or her persistence, or her cleverness? All of these, by the way, are in contrast with the occasional behavior of even his disciples who from time

to time have questioned who he is and have been slow to understand. And now Jesus is the one who is converted – he commends her faith and heals her daughter.

This is a hard story for two reasons—first because of the behavior of Jesus which just simply cringe-worthy. And the second reason is because in the course of this story, he changes his mind and his behavior, he is converted, he grows in understanding. For some of us, the idea that God would grow and change, or be converted, is a difficult thought – isn't God eternal, unchanging, perfect? To me, this is the crux of why this is a difficult story—and I don't have a neat answer for it, nor do I have a good answer for the harsh behavior of Jesus at the beginning of the story. I only have some possibilities:

- As to the bad behavior of Jesus—the standard theology about Jesus is that he is fully human and fully divine. Perhaps this is a case of his humanity showing. And, if Jesus is subject to the same bad behaviors and prejudices of other people, it only makes his ability to usually transcend that more profound—and perhaps possible for us.
- In this story, we see that Jesus is touched by people—he is vulnerable to us.
- As to God and Jesus changing—change is a constant in the world. Perhaps God too is in a constant process of ongoing transformation—or perhaps God's teachings to us change over time as our capacity to understand changes.
- In both the story from Isaiah and the story from Matthew, the change is toward more inclusion, more compassion. We think of God's Kingdom as an "already but not yet" process of being already in the world but not yet fully realized—perhaps God and God's world are both deepening in compassion and that is part of the process of God's Kingdom becoming more visible—ongoing transformation.

Finally, the challenge to us in reading the Bible is not only to understand it, but to let it read us and shape our living. The question remains, "How, then, shall we live?" And even lacking a tidy understanding of this story, there are still crumbs of insight that fall to us. Perhaps we should always be open to being surprised by God, and to recognize that if God can grow and change, then we can, too. The thing to notice is that God's change is always toward more inclusion, more compassion, more justice. So, can we, in our living, be part of the deepening compassion in the world? Can our capacity for welcome deepen to include welcoming change in ourselves? Can our trust in God and God's word make room for not understanding? And is living with that non-understanding a way of growing in faith—trusting God and God's goodness and God's love even when we can't fully understand? Are the questions we have part of the way that God continues to reform, or transform, us?

Sometimes there is as much growth to be had in living the questions as in knowing the answers. In recognizing what we don't know, we can let go of the idol of our own understanding and worship the living God, who is both known and always unknown to us.

Amen.