

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

A NAME BETTER THAN SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Isaiah 56:1-8

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

Thus says the Lord:

*Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.² 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.*

*3 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."*

4 For thus says the Lord:

*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,*

*5 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.*

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,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold 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 Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

[Author's note: To proclaim the stunning prophetic vision of Isaiah 56:1-8 and its intimate connection with the most pivotal moment of Jesus' life, one must add back into the pericope verses 2-5 and treat Isaiah 56:1-8 as a whole. Thus, I urge reading all of Isaiah 56:1-8 as the Old Testament lesson for the day if you are preaching on this text. Not to do so fails to catch (a) the shocking breadth of God's inclusivity at the beginning and end of Third Isaiah, (b) Jesus' daring in-your-face citation of Isaiah 56 on Holy Monday, and (c) the great reversal taking place in Jesus' cursing of the fig tree and his enactment of Isaiah 56:3 in a potent parabolic attack upon the temple's separatistic leadership in Mark 11:12-24. I find it an unfortunate and glaring omission that neither Isaiah 56:2-5 nor Mark 11:12-24 (and its synoptic parallels) are read anywhere in the three-year Revised Common Lectionary, when they are the very interpretive word Jesus gives to explain his disruption in the temple, which is the most pivotal moment of his life and the

immediate cause of his death. This is one day out of the entire three-year cycle to correct an unfortunate wrong.]

DIAGNOSIS: Impotent, Like a Dry Tree

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Most Excluded Imaginable*

Who is the most excluded person imaginable when it comes to ministry in God's house of prayer? For the sons and daughters of Israel, Isaiah says it is a eunuch—a foreign, sexually mutilated male. Such a person is explicitly excluded by priestly law and would never be permitted to enter the inner courtyard of the temple, much less bring a sacrifice or offering, much less preside as a valid priest whose service and ministry makes a sacrifice acceptable to God (Dt 23:1; Lev 21:20). A “foreign eunuch” is the male as far from being a second temple “priest” as the children of Israel could ever image in Isaiah's day. And what about our day? Who for us or for our denomination are the most excluded imaginable from ordained ministry? For some it is women; for others partnered gays and lesbians. Those who write the rules in any denomination always seem to draw a sharp line somewhere, often along sexual lines.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hopeless & Discouraged*

Those who are the most excluded become hopeless & discouraged, especially when they are faithful and steadfast in the key respects. Witness the pain and agony of thousands of women and hundreds of partnered gay and lesbian persons who have sought to be faithful pastors, priests or bishops over recent years, but who have been prevented by the polity of their denomination. For Isaiah, the key was “keeping the sabbath” and “not doing any evil” (Isaiah 56:2). For those of the Crossings tradition, the

key is “faith active in love”: a living, active faith in the hope and promise of Christ’s life, death and resurrection that results in bearing good fruit, the fruit of the Spirit (Augsburg Confession 6). To exclude persons who show gifts for ministry and who are already “joined to God” in the key respects is neither just nor right, the post-exilic Isaiah says.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : A Dead Dry Tree

This hopelessness and discouragement creates separation from God and a living death for those who are excluded from ministry for marginal reasons in God’s new day and age. Isaiah expresses this powerfully, poignantly, and parabolically: “*I am just a dry tree,*” the eunuch says. “*The Lord will surely separate me [cut me off, circumcise me] from his people.*” Sharp, sad words, full of sexual innuendo and double entendre (especially given the source of a eunuch’s disqualifying disfigurement and the particular cutting and separating required to be one of the circumcised!). And the parables of Jesus make it pretty clear what he thinks of an unfruitful tree: “*Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?*”

PROGNOSIS: Part of a Potent Priesthood & Fruitful Ministry

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Christ’s Tree of Death becomes the Tree of Life

And yet, the opening eight verses of Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66) envision a radical reversal. They reflect a lesson learned in the cross and crucible of exile and restoration, when some foreigners were genuinely attracted to the God of Israel and his cult. A day is coming soon when those most excluded from ministry in God’s house will be fully included...“*for [God’s] house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*” And never should we Christians overlook that this amazing, mind-blowing reversal in Isaiah 56 is embraced and affirmed by Jesus

at the most pivotal moment in his life. For this is THE interpretive word Jesus gives for the immediate cause of his death—his disruption in the temple.

On the Monday of Holy Week, a juiced-up Jesus creates a provocative disturbance in the temple and then immediately provides an interpretative word by citing this passage from Isaiah 56 (plus a touch of Jeremiah, too), *“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of violent separatists”* (Mark 11:17). Jesus, the true owner of the temple, both as God (returning to the temple after years in exile) and as the ultimate Davidic king, calls for radical inclusion by citing Isaiah 56. And Jesus brackets it all with his encounter with the barren fig tree (Mark 11:12-15, 20-25). It is the current custodians of the temple (the Sadducees, the leading Pharisees and Herodians) who are the dry, fruitless tree in his enactment of Isaiah’s parable, not the foreign eunuchs that are truly attracted to the God of Israel and who faithfully wish to enter, worship and minister in God’s house of prayer.

Jesus is crucified in a large part due to this insulting and outlandish claim. But his barren tree of death (the cross) became a tree of life whose leaves are for the “healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2). Jesus is raised from the dead to show that he and this word from Isaiah truly speak for God and that no power in this world can stop him from enacting it. And so it is no accident that an Ethiopian eunuch encountered by Philip is one of the first foreigners converted to Christianity (Acts 8:4ff.). That conversion is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the wide inclusiveness it brings. Holy Week is the time of Isaiah’s “soon”—*“soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.”*

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Name Better Than Sons & Daughters

And so, there is a loud “Do not...!” The “new” word of the gospel *emphatically contradicts* the “former” word of the law. “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.’ For thus says the Lord: ...I will give, in my house [the temple] and within my walls [the city of Jerusalem] a monument [Yad] and a name [Vashem] better than sons and daughters;...an everlasting name that shall not be ‘cut off.’” Speak of powerful and lasting names, hope, and encouragement. This is the potent text that gives name to Israel’s hallowed holocaust memorial, “Yad Vashem,” because, like eunuchs, so many Jews who were killed in or survived that great ordeal had no children to carry on their name and so are in dire need of “an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” Their predicament is the same. A memorable and lasting name.

And what, pray-tell, name is that? What name could possibly be “better than” saying “I am a child of Israel” or “I am God’s son or daughter”? Why, it is the name “minister” of course; that is, a member of God’s royal priesthood. Isaiah’s startling vision is not just that God will include foreigners, or that God-loving, God-trusting sexually mutilated foreign males will be allowed inside the temple to pray. Nor, is it only that they will be permitted to bring burnt offerings and sacrifices to the altar. No, Isaiah’s vision is that they will become fully authorized priests whose temple service (ministry) on behalf of others will be fully accepted on God’s altar. For “to minister to him” and “to be his servants” (56:6) are synonyms for priestly acts in this period and “minister” is often used in poetic parallel with “priest” (Isaiah 61:6; 66:21; Joel 1:9, 13; 2:17; Nehemiah 10:37, 40). To call oneself a “son” or “daughter” of God can too easily lead to exclusivistic, separatistic thinking and actions,

which often end in violence. Consequently, to be named a “minister” of God to all peoples and part of “the royal priesthood of believers” is better and more congruent with the radical inclusivity of this God of Israel, “*who gathers the outcasts of Israel,*” and who “*gathers others to them besides those already gathered.*”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Just, Right, and Joyful Inclusion*

To include as full-fledged ministers in the church of Jesus Christ genuinely faithful persons who possess the key gifts for ministry but who have hitherto been excluded due to an outdated or a non-essential prohibition is just, right, and joyful. And it ought to be celebrated, not resisted. The inclusion of faithful eunuchs is a carefully crafted, mind-blowing example meant to articulate the wide breadth of Isaiah’s admonition when he says, “Maintain justice, and do what is right.” And Jesus judges it as THE most fitting “proof passage” he could cite as he reaches his “tipping point” and puts his own life upon the line to usher in God’s new day by creating a disturbance in the temple in order to reestablish it to be what it was always meant to be—“*a house of prayer for all peoples.*”

And this inclusion makes those who were once excluded “happy.” Joyful. Witness the thousands of women and hundreds of partnered gay and lesbian persons who now joyfully serve in effective ordained ministries and who bear “good fruit.” The very fruit that Jesus is looking for from those who minister in God’s name—that nine-fold fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. From a dead, dry tree to a fruitful ministry. That is the enormous change in hearts and minds that the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring.