

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2020
Matthew 15: 10-28 and Isaiah 56:1-8
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Enough for All

Xenophobia has been a part of human cultures from the beginning of time. For those unfamiliar with the term, “xenophobia” is the fear of the stranger, or the fear of the “other”. It is not difficult to understand why this was, early in the emergence of the first human groups. The world was a dangerous place, and family groups or units that survived were those that worked together. Danger from predators, from natural disasters, from the threat of famine and perhaps most especially, from other human groups required that one cooperated with others in your family unit.

When human society developed to enable our ancestors to live in cities and towns, they required some cooperation with other groups, through trade for example. However, sometimes societies were led to the desire to dominate through conquest those other groups, so as to have enough food to feed one's people, enough workers to produce what society needed, and enough soldiers for both protection and conquest. So the stranger remained an object of fear.

That was certainly true for all of the cultures from which the Bible and the people of the Bible emerged. The ancient peoples of the Old Testament period were formed in part around the idea that God had chosen them to play a special role in history. At times their leaders felt it absolutely imperative that they keep themselves apart from other peoples. This notion of only the purest of the Hebrew people being allowed to be a part of this divinely formed community meant that, in the law, the exclusion of other groups was codified.

However, there has always been that thread of a thought in the faith of Israel, and the faith of the Christian community, that God envisions something beyond our fearful separateness. That is especially strong in the tradition of Isaiah. The verses we heard today are the beginning of the work of the third prophet whose message is found in the book of Isaiah. This prophet is sometimes referred to as Third Isaiah, or as Isaiah of the Return, meaning that he wrote during the period when the Babylonian exiles returned to Jerusalem and Judah to begin the process of rebuilding their communities and their lives. His work is found in chapters 56 to 66 of Isaiah.

These words of Third Isaiah begin with a challenge to other voices returning from Babylon. Those voices were advocating for a strict reading of the law, and a forced separation from the community of those who fell outside that reading. While this is, to us, ancient history we should not misjudge the heated debates that must have consumed those returnees over who belonged and who did not. That debate is all too contemporary, so we do have something to learn from the past.

Isaiah tackles front and center the issue of two groups excluded by the legal code in Deuteronomy, foreigners and eunuchs. Isaiah was clear, it is righteousness that counts. Or to put it a bit differently, it is the “right relationship” that one has with the will of God and with neighbor that determines whether or not a person is welcome in the community. For Isaiah righteousness superseded issues of national origin or the condition of one's body. God includes the righteous person Isaiah said, so the followers of God dare not exclude them.

In today's Gospel reading it is those same issues still being addressed, which is a clue for us that they never seem to find resolution. Each new generation, each new setting wrestles with the same tension between welcoming the stranger and fearing the stranger. For those who fear, a religious justification for that fear is never far from the surface.

The first part of Matthew 15, and we might note that verses 10 to 20 are optional in the lectionary, and seem at first reading to be disconnected from verses 21 to 28. But they are not. At issue is the criticism that Jesus received from his religious opponents for not insisting that his disciples keep the law strictly, in the "right" way. Specifically he did not chastise his disciples for failing to wash their hands before eating. Read the first 9 verses of chapter 15 to see how forcefully Jesus condemns the attitude of his opponents.

Then he says to his disciples that they are not defiled by what they eat. Whether their hands have been washed or not, the food they consume is used by the body and then becomes waste. But the attitudes of a person, which begin as internal thoughts and come out through the mouth and through actions, these determine the character of a person, and one is in a right-relationship with God or is defiled before God by such actions and words. And then the lectionary text leads us to an encounter that for many has been most troubling.

Jesus leaves a territory where Jews are dominant and goes to a Gentile region, the area near Tyre and Sidon. He is now the outsider, he is the foreigner, and his encounter with the "Canaanite" woman occurs where she is at home and he is a sojourner.

In the exchange that follows, her request for healing for her daughter, his seeming reluctance to offer aid outside the Jewish community, her follow-up that she is not asking for anything that would deny a blessing to a Jewish mother, she is asking for her daughter who is in need of a blessing only Jesus can give. Finally he grants her request and commends her faith as "great".

Now the lectionary does us no favors here, because we will skip over the follow-up to this encounter. But it is important for understanding that spiritual reality reflected in today's readings from Isaiah and Matthew.

After this healing, many Gentiles will bring to Jesus their own family and friends in need of healings, and all will be made whole, to the astonishment of the crowds. They will follow Jesus to another lonely mountain side, and Matthew will tell of a second feeding miracle, this time the feeding of 4,000 men, plus the women and children. This feast will come from "seven loaves of bread and a few small fish.". After everyone has eaten their fill seven baskets of leftovers are gathered. The number seven referred to the number of Gentile nations that historically surrounded Israel, and became a short hand way of talking about all of those "others".

I hope you get the symbolism of this story. The Canaanite woman knew that there was enough healing with Jesus to include her daughter. Then Jesus demonstrated through the healing of the multitude and the feeding of the 4,000 that there was enough for those outside Israel as well. Enough blessing, enough grace, enough room to belong, enough welcome to include.

Who is excluded from the circle of God's love? No one.

That brings us up to our time, and how we think about, talk about and act toward the stranger in our midst, the "other" to our community.

I have an early memory about this from my childhood in the church. So you know, I like to describe the community in which I was raised as a “Norwegian ghetto”. It was a small farming community on the edge of the Great Plains, and quite literally all but one family in our school district was of Norwegian descent, and 100% of those in our church had that ethnic background.

The memory I want to share is of a discussion between some adult women, one of whom was my grandmother. They were talking about the unfortunate engagement of a young Norwegian Lutheran person who was to marry outside the faith. How hard it would be on her family, how sad for her parents and for her. She was engaged to a young man from a Swedish Lutheran church.

This was a long time ago, and few of us would find any fault with a young man or woman today making plans to marry someone who is an active Christian, who was raised as a Lutheran, even if their ancestors came from another part of Northern Europe from our own.

But we all know that young people do have the habit of falling in love with outside our smaller, narrower communities. Today parents will meet their child’s intended, some of whom will be from a different Christian tradition, or no faith background at all. Some will be from a different racial community than their own. Some will come from a faith tradition separate from Christianity, they will be Jewish or Islamic, Hindu or Buddhist, Mormon or Baha’i.

Perhaps some of you have already experienced that reality. If you have, or if you are just thinking of such a possibility right now I have a question for you.

How does that idea make you feel?

If your honest answer is “uncomfortable”, or “afraid”, or even some emotion as strong as “appalled”, then you know the truth of the struggle I’ve been describing today within your own heart. The fear of the stranger, the experience of xenophobia is not absent from our own time or culture. But it is subject to the same Biblical corrective as that same mindset in the community of Isaiah 56, or of the early Christian church.

Why is this important for Trinity Lutheran Church? Because the way we respond within our own families - nuclear or extended - is the same way we will respond within our church. And being “righteous”, or in a “right relationship with God”, cannot exist if we are in a “wrong relationship with the other, the stranger, the eunuch or the foreigner”.

Let me say it a different way. Trinity, like almost every Lutheran congregation I have known, describes itself as a “loving and supportive community”. I know that’s true, because I’ve heard that description from you, and I’ve seen evidence of that love and support for one another.

But hear this, and know it is not a judgmental statement, but a theological truth. We will never embody fully that value of love and support if we do not show love and support for the “other”, the “stranger”, the “outsider”.

I do not underestimate the challenge of living into such an inclusive culture. But I do know that it is possible, for those powers that transform us have an abundance of supply. There is enough for all. Enough grace, enough forgiveness, enough welcome, enough love.

Let us be fully the church that Christ has called us to become.