

A House of Prayer for All People

In the name of him who died for the sins of all that God may have mercy upon all, dear friends in Christ: A major theme that runs throughout the Scriptures is division or separation. We see time and again that the Lord divides things and sets them apart. For example, in the Creation account, God divides the light from the darkness, the waters below from the waters above in the atmosphere, and the dry land from the seas. He even divides living creatures into different categories like birds, fish, and land animals; and within these broad categories he divides them into species each designed to reproduce after its own kind.

As the biblical storyline continues, God calls out one man, Abraham; he makes a special covenant with him and says that he will make of him a great nation, a people set apart from all others. Through this chosen nation the Lord promised to bring the Savior into the world. Following the account along, this nation becomes known as Israel. The Lord makes it clear to them that he has set them apart from all other peoples. “Come out from them”, he says, “and don’t be like them. Instead, be the people I’ve called you to be: my own people, my chosen nation.” To them exclusively he gives the Law through Moses, which (again) is largely about division: these are behaviors acceptable to the Lord, these behaviors are unacceptable; these foods are clean you may eat them, these foods are unclean, leave them alone; this place where I’ve told you to build my Temple is holy, this is where I will be so you can meet with me; every place else is common ground, meaning it’s not where you’re supposed to worship and offer sacrifices; these days are special and are to be treated differently, like the Sabbath and certain festival days, the rest of the days are not. You get the idea. The Law is largely about division: making distinctions and separating things from each other. Even within Israel itself, which was divided into 12 tribes, one tribe, the Levites, were set apart to serve the Lord as priests, scribes, and teachers – to instruct the people and lead them in worship. So, as you can see, God’s people, Israel, were steeped in this idea of division.

But there’s another consistent theme that runs throughout the Scriptures, and that is the idea of inclusion or uniting things that are separate and distinct. Marriage is a good example of this. In marriage two people – yes, two people who are fundamentally and biologically different (despite what idiotic judges have recently decided) – come together to become united in one flesh. Another example is Jesus Christ the author and finisher of our faith: in him both God and man are united in one person. And his mission as the Savior is to unite people who are estranged from God back to him – to end their separation. And in doing this he unites them together in one body we call the church.

So these two themes, division and separation on one hand and inclusion and union on the other, run side by side throughout the Scriptures. And rather see them as polar opposites or contradictions, we want to see them as complimentary. That is to say, the Lord wants things to be divided and separate from things they ought to be separate from, and included and united with things they ought to be united with. Problems arise when people get confused and act as if they don’t know the difference (do these things belong together or need to stay apart?) or when one idea is stressed too much to the exclusion of the other.

It’s a problem of this nature that Isaiah is addressing in today’s Old Testament lesson. In it, the prophet speaks of a time to come when those who had formerly been excluded from the covenant relationship with the Lord that Israel alone enjoyed would be welcomed into it. That would have come as a shock and surprise to Isaiah’s original audience. You see, in some ways they got the separation idea down too well. They liked the idea that “We are the chosen

ones. Obviously it means that we are better than everyone else; that's why God picked us." So, the idea that people from other nations might become acceptable to the Lord and have what they had wouldn't sit too well. It would even be offensive. It would mean, "We're not special anymore."

So, like I said, Isaiah's hearers would have been shocked and offended; but they shouldn't have been, for this had been the Lord's stated plan all along. When the Lord called Abraham some 1500 years before Isaiah's time, he had specifically said that he was going to bless *all families on earth* through Abraham's descendants. Similarly, when King Solomon dedicated the Temple almost 400 years before Isaiah, he asked the Lord to hear and answer the petitions of foreigners – non-Israelites – who directed their prayers to him here in his house. "Let this Temple be a house of prayer for all people", Solomon prayed.

Solomon understood what the people of Isaiah's time had long since forgotten. The Lord's plan in choosing Israel, making a special covenant with them, and giving them his Holy Law was to raise them up and make them stand out. They were to be a light to the Gentiles, a bright beacon of righteousness through which the Lord would draw all people to himself. The Lord wanted Israel to keep his commands, order their lives by his Word, and worship him at his Temple in such a way that foreigners would look and say, "Oh, that's what it means to have a relationship with the One True Living God who loves and cares for his people, who forgives their sins, and who guides them by his Spirit. That's wonderful. I want that too. How can I have it?"

Unfortunately, with only a few rare exceptions, it didn't work out that way. Why not? Two reasons. The first was the elitist attitude I've already mentioned: "We're better than you. The Lord found something pleasing in us, in our innate goodness, our superior spirituality, or whatever, and that's why he chose us and not you. So, we're in and you're out, and we're not going to share because you aren't worth it. You're not good enough to have what we have." This was taking the idea of separation way too far in the wrong direction.

But the other problem was that they didn't take it far enough in the right direction. God called them to be different, to stand out by ordering their lives by his Word; but they didn't do that. Instead they lived their lives exactly like the idol worshipping pagans all around them. They even adopted their idols and worshipped them. Though they had God's Word, they didn't show themselves to be any more righteous or godly than their neighbors who didn't have it: their poor and needy were just as neglected and oppressed, their judges and courts just as corrupt, their marriages and families just as broken and distressed, their servants just as abused, their trust in their supposedly great God just as weak and fleeting. Though they had what no one else had, you'd never know it by looking at them. No one was drawn to the light because they weren't emitting any.

This is why today's reading from Isaiah begins with, "Thus says the Lord: 'Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed.'" Hear that? *You do what's right. You keep my justice* (which means walk by faith in the Words and Promises of God). *You do that and then* the foreigners will come and join themselves to the Lord. And then my house will be a house of prayer for all peoples. Sadly, it didn't happen. Despite the mission God gave them to be his servant on behalf of all peoples, and despite Isaiah reminding them of it, Israel pretty much failed to accomplish the task.

But in today's Gospel, we see Jesus doing what Israel failed to do. A Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon comes to Jesus. She hails from a place notorious in biblical history for the worship of Baal and many other evil occult practices. Her daughter is sorely oppressed by a demonic spirit – and small wonder, for the kinds of things the people did there

would have been open invitations for unclean spirits to take up residence in their bodies. But now it's become a problem. The demon which was probably welcomed at first has now become an unruly tenant. Its presence brings misery to the poor girl. Of course, that's the way sin works too: what initially looks so attractive and tempting becomes a form of slavery that leads to death. That's where this Canaanite woman's daughter is now.

And so her mother has come to Jesus for help – from which we can deduce that she's heard about him. Word about him has spread even into this dark land. She knows his reputation – how the God of Israel is working mightily through him. Beyond that, she's heard that he is kind and just and good. His light really shines. And while she probably would have been reluctant to go to Jesus in Israel, both because she dare not leave her daughter behind in her terrible condition and because of the way the people of that land would treat her with contempt, denying her food and shelter and what not – even though she couldn't get to him, now she doesn't have to. Jesus has come to her – or close enough anyway.

Interesting, though, how Jesus treats her. It's an act he puts on. He behaves in the same elitist fashion that the Jews were known for. At first he ignores her. The disciples expect this. That's the way they really are. They hate Gentiles and think of them as subhuman. But after a while, hearing her pathetic cries, even their hearts soften a bit. I know in the translation we heard the disciples say to Jesus "Send her away"; but that's not quite right. What they actually say is "Release her." They're asking Jesus to set the girl free of the demon so they won't be bothered her mother anymore. That's why Jesus responds to them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." He's telling them, "It's not my job to help her." This plays right to the disciples' own prejudices. They'd think, "Yes, he's right. God is for us and not for them." But the woman won't be deterred. She has seen his light. She won't be put off. She has to have it. She kneels in front of him in a posture of worship and pleads, "Lord, help me."

It is the perfect prayer. And in her making it, Solomon's prayer is fulfilled: for Jesus is the Temple in which God dwells on earth. And now she, a foreigner, is praying to the Lord in his Temple. But again, Jesus declines to help – this time insulting her, calling her a dog not fit to receive the children's bread. Again, it's part of his act. The Jews of that day often referred to non-Jews as dogs. But I have to believe this comment would have shocked the disciples. Even though they'd all thought and said similar things about non-Jews, to hear Jesus say it to this poor woman's face in the midst of her agony on behalf of her daughter, they'd have to think, "Man, that's cruel!" Which is rather the point: Jesus is showing them how they've been treating and thinking about Gentiles all their lives. It isn't pretty.

Still, even with the insult, this mother will not be put off. "Fine. If you say so, I'm a dog. But even a dog is allowed the crumbs that fall from the master's table." This is what Jesus wants his disciples to see. This is what true faith looks like. There's nothing elitist about it. It comes to the Lord in need with all humility. It says, "I deserve nothing; but I know and trust that you are good and kind and caring even to those who deserve nothing."

This is the kind of faith Jesus commends to his disciples. This is the kind of faith Jesus commends to us, for we deserve nothing – nothing but wrath and judgment and condemnation. But by God's grace and mercy, we have been drawn to the light of his truth. We have been washed and redeemed by Jesus, our Savior. We have been saved from everlasting death by his death on the cross. We have been called out of darkness to walk in his light. And we have been called to let our light shine that others may see it and be drawn to Jesus the Savior.

The question is: How are we doing? We wonder that the church isn't growing by leaps and bounds. We wonder why our non-Christian friends and neighbors don't seem much

interested in joining us. Could the problem be us? Could it be that they don't see this as a house of prayer that is open to them? Are we guilty of the same kind of elitist attitude that tells others "We deserve God's grace and salvation, but you don't"? I recently read of an evangelical congregation that has a strip club operating a few doors down from their church building. The staff and some of the clientele of this club have been staging protests near the church for the last few weeks. Why? It's because the members of the church are extremely rude and abusive to them. They shout at them and call them names. Some have gone so far as to spit on these people and their vehicles. In an effort to discourage customers through embarrassment, the pastor and other church members take pictures of license plates of people who enter the business and post them on the internet.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not speaking in favor of strip clubs. But what do these people who work at or patronize that business see? They see that Christians are mean, judgmental, self-righteous jerks who think that they're better than us. Why in the world would we ever want to join them or believe what they do? It's an extreme example, perhaps; but I wonder if that's not the way we too are perceived. Listen, we can't expect those who don't have God's Word to order their lives according to it. They live like godless pagans because they are godless pagans. And so would we be if not for the love and mercy of Jesus who saved us without any merit or worthiness on our part. But now having received it, we can with all humility show them that love. We can show him his mercy. We can show them that we care. And seeing the light of Christ in us, they may come to know the truth. It isn't us against them; it's us *for* them on Christ's behalf.

Of course, the flip side of this is actually letting his light shine in our lives. Israel failed in their witness to the world not just because of their snobbish elitism, but also because there was no noticeable difference between them and their pagan neighbors. We need to ask that question too: Are our lives so ordered by God's Word that it's apparent to outsiders? I'm not talking about blowing our own horns, here: "Oh, look at us! Aren't we wonderful?" No, I'm talking about being kind and compassionate and generous and forgiving and faithful to our spouses and diligent in our duties and attentive to the needs of our neighbors and always eager to grow in our relationship with the Lord through his appointed means of grace, his Word and Sacraments. I'm talking about being the kind of people God has called us to be through faith in his Son, the kind of people he makes us through the leading of his Holy Spirit. When our neighbors look at us, what do they see? People who are pretty much like everyone else, or people who obviously have something deep inside them, some source of strength and virtue that they would like to have too?

Isaiah's message to the people of his day was to repent of both their false belief in their own moral superiority and their failure to live lives that reflected the light of God's truth. Today, through the word of the prophet, the Lord also calls us to repent of these same sins. May we heed his call, that receiving God's forgiveness through faith in the sacrifice of his Son, this church may become known to all as the Lord's house of prayer for *all* people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!