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Isaiah 56:6-8

Luke 5:29-39

WHAT JESUS REJECTS AND EMBRACES: WHO'S IN?

The chosen people – the story that was woven through the Hebrew scriptures was that God chose a particular people with whom to enter into covenant relationship. The story begins with Abraham and Sarah who get established in the land of Palestine as their new home. The story continues through their descendants, Isaac and Jacob, patriarchal leaders who have a special relationship with God. But then, things go awry, with rivalries between the sons of Jacob, with one of the sons, Joseph, being sold into slavery by his brothers. He ends up in Egypt. By God's grace, the family is provided for during a time of great famine, even through what had happened to Joseph, who unbeknownst to his brothers, had gotten a position overseeing the food production and storage. This chosen people of God stay in Egypt and get established there. Yet, over time, they begin to be oppressed and eventually get enslaved themselves, a situation that lasts for a long time. Finally, God raises up leadership in the person of Moses, and works through him to liberate the people from their slavery in Egypt. The Hebrew law is given to them as a gift from God to guide them as a people. They eventually manage to return to the land of Palestine, understanding that place flowing with milk and honey as a land promised to them by God.

A chosen people in a promised land – you might see how they felt special, looking at other peoples who they viewed as less than special, even in the eyes of God. They built a temple, where sacrifices could be made to cleanse their sins before God. Those who brought their animals sacrifices were not to use animals that were less than physically sound – they were not to bring less than their best unto God. That practice somehow shaped the earlier mindset about which humans were welcome to come into the holy space of the temple. Those with certain physical challenges or those who were not of Hebrew origin were somehow understood to be unwelcome there. There were those who were welcome before a holy God, and those who were not welcome in what was understood to be the very presence of God.

We move forward several hundred years, and geopolitical realities had changed. Babylonian armies move into and conquer Palestine and destroy the temple. Many Hebrews are hauled off and live in exile away from the Promised land for a couple of generations before they are allowed to return to their homeland. They rebuild the temple that had been destroyed. Yet, out of that experience of having been treated as an outcast, an exile in a foreign land, they begin to see, and we hear Isaiah express that the temple is not to be an exclusive place of worship just for the Hebrew people, that it was instead to be a house of prayer for all people, those of Jewish heritage and those who were Gentiles. They still understood themselves, as Hebrew people, to have been chosen by God, but chosen in a way that did not mean that they were favored by God while all others lived under God's disfavor. Instead, they had been chosen as those who had a special role – they had been blessed in order to be a blessing for all people. They had been shown God's light and grace so that they could share that experience and understanding with others.

Yet, how to understand the concept of being a people chosen by God continued to be a point of contention up through the time of Jesus' ministry. He ran up against established religious leaders who taught that there should be religious insiders and outsiders based on some forms of identity and how well people adhered to the Hebrew law. They were shocked that Jesus hung out with people that did not measure up to the religious leaders' standards of holiness. Jesus would eat with and he even called as one of his disciples a tax collector who had collaborated with the Gentile Roman officials. There were others who were deemed to be sinners with whom Jesus associated. They could not understand that. Yet, Jesus rejected their sense that some people, in God's eyes, had greater value than others. He rejected that God's grace was reserved only for those of a particular nationality, heritage or identity. The religious leaders viewed Jesus' message that God's welcome was broad and deep as scandalous. At times, we, as part of the church, have done so as well.

It sadly took a long time before Presbyterians began ordaining females as well as males to have leadership roles in the life of the church. Some parts of the church still do not allow that. It took even longer for Presbyterians to get to the place of understanding that God called not only those of the dominant sexual orientation to roles of service and leadership. Jesus embraced the notion that God could work

through all kinds of people. It took us Presbyterians a while to get to where we are, but that is now an important part of our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. We gather primarily as those who were once categorized as religious outcasts – most of us are Gentiles. But we have experienced God’s grand welcome, and we are called to reflect that to others, regardless of nationality or race or many other categories of identity. We recognize that there is no one who perfectly lives up to the potential placed in them by God, so we all rely upon God’s grace. Christians who exclude based upon identity or even categories of sinful behavior have a limited understanding of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Every person is a beloved child of God and should be treated as such, so that our welcome to this house of prayer is a reflection of the welcome we have experienced from God.

I heard about a Minnesota woman who was doing the hopeful work of spring, transplanting small lettuce plants that had gotten started inside the house because the growing season there is pretty short. As she was transplanting the lettuce into the raised beds out in the back yard, a curious five-year-old next door neighbor wandered over. Little Myla asked if she could help with the planting. The woman showed her how to prepare the soil and to carefully place each of the young plants into this garden. The girl paused as she looked at the lettuce and asked, “Is this scary for the plants, going from one place to another?” The woman responded in comforting tones, “No, it’s like coming home.” It seemed that the five-year-old liked that thought. Thereafter, with each and every plant they transferred, the little girl whispered to each plant, “Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home.”¹

That is the message God wants to convey to all who might come to this place. You and I have experienced that welcome. We have the great opportunity, perhaps you might even say we have been chosen to reflect that divine welcome here. It is what Jesus embraced. Friends, God’s beloved, I urge us to continue moving toward becoming a house of prayer for all people, as we take actions that help us echo God’s whisper saying to any and to all, “Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home.”

¹ Story told by Brennan Blue in a sermon, *On the Road: Who Decides Who’s Welcome?*, October 15, 2017, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, MN

