

Yes, Even Them

Isaiah 56: 1-8

Matthew 15: 21-28

This has been a difficult week for our nation, revealing the kinds of divisions that plague us. These divisions are nothing new. Indeed, they pre-date the founding of the nation and are incorporated in our founding documents.

No one in this sanctuary today reflects the hate groups who organized a protest in Charlottesville. However, many folks around us lack any willingness to try to understand how we got here and what keeps our nation in the thrall of racial and ethnic division.

The problem is **white people** like us who are thoroughly convinced that our way of life, our understandings about society, and how it works are quite accurate when applied to people who are not white. It is not the same and never has been.

Such beliefs are like fairy tales when compared to the experiences of people who are not white. Such beliefs are naïve when statistical knowledge about differential treatment shows repeatedly **how different it is** for non-whites when encountering employment, education, health care, law enforcement, the courts, sentencing, prison populations, economic mobility, wealth, income, history, immigration, politics, the environment, housing, and the list goes on and on.

Our assumptions about parity are very convenient for us, but they're all wrong. And the worst part is that we are defiantly indifferent, insisting that it isn't so bad. Once again, we're reflecting our own experience, because it isn't bad **for us**. Besides, we've seen how *far* our society has come. Of course, we *have* made great progress, but that progress has not come close to reaching the fairy tale notions that we cherish about how other people live. We fail to realize how far apart we had been, and how most of the last 150 years were spent keeping the old racial and ethnic divisions firmly in place. Most of our imagined progress has only been in the last 50 years. Even with that progress, the stubborn gaps indicate that it will take several more generations to overcome.

All of this is to say that our unwillingness to imagine, much less accept, a different way of life for different people is a matter of empathy or its absence, or at least its limits. The dictionary defines empathy like this: [*the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.*](#)

Of all the many articles I read this week surrounding the troubling events in Charlottesville, the one that struck me the most was [*one that talked about a group that converts white supremacists and others.*](#) It is based in Chicago and called *Life After Hate*. It was started in 2011 by former white supremacist leaders. It studies the forces that draw people to hate, and helps those who are willing to disengage from radical extremist movements. The director is Sammy Rangel, a former gang leader, whose TED Talk is embedded in the article. (By the way, his TED Talk describing his growing up is one of the most disgusting and disturbing stories I've ever heard, and I've heard a lot.)

Rangel said: “What we all have in common, for the most part, is that compassion and empathy are common themes in what helped turn us around.” And later he adds: “It’s only through kindness, only through understanding, only through compassion and peace that people were able to get past all of our armor. It was never aggression, it was never shaming.” The group provided a bond of belonging, and acting aggressively, passionately, and violently. Aggressive actions by others, either verbally or physically, only serve to heighten and validate the rage and hate.

In working with members of hate groups, a team of capable individuals works with participants to help them redevelop, or perhaps develop for the first time, a sense of empathy for others, belonging to an alternate group, and embracing a different set of key values. The role of empathy is huge. Many have stories of childhood abuse, betrayal, abandonment, isolation, deprivation, and the like. Those circumstances make a person focus on themselves in a desperate attempt to hold together some form of reality, to cope with things that are beyond their control, and gain some sense of security amid a world of constant threat, contempt, manipulation, and brutality.

Breaking them out of the “me” focus and into a shared reality with trustworthy, supportive, non-judgmental others enables them to begin to see through the eyes of the other, to hear through their ears, to begin to imagine the different life reality that they encounter.

The lectionary provided some interesting scriptures for today. The first passage comes from Isaiah 56 and has a well-known phrase within it. It is the beginning of what is called Third Isaiah, dating from the period about 10-15 years after the people of God have returned from Babylon and have discovered that things haven’t turned out as well as they had hoped, and in fact things have been pretty tough and grim.

The word of the lord comes like this: *Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the one who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.* That all sounds pretty straight forward. The initial call is for doing justice and doing what’s right, for salvation and deliverance shall follow. The one who is blessed does this, maintaining their spiritual and ritual discipline, and avoiding doing evil.

But then the declaration of the Lord God turns to foreigners and to eunuchs. Being a vassal state of the Persian Empire, there are plenty of foreigners, and eunuchs as well. Eunuchs, of course, are those who have been castrated to prevent any illicit births in the royal household, and they can therefore be trusted in certain sensitive venues. What is certainly true also is that these people are not Jews and would not be welcome religiously. They’re regarded as ritually unclean and would be in a naturally negative relationship or, at best, non-relationship with God.

Yet here in Third Isaiah, we find a totally unexpected turn. First speaking to eunuchs, God says: *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. Eunuchs? Really? They're going to get this favored treatment normally reserved only for Jews who have maintained their ritual purity and righteousness.

Then turning to foreigners, the Lord God says: *These [foreigners] 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.* God is welcoming them into the Temple itself. Foreigners!

There you have it – the unclean are welcomed into a full relationship with the Lord God of the Jews. Here in Third Isaiah, God is making a stunning outreach to the sinfully unacceptable, not simply to acknowledge their existence, but to extend the promise of the covenant normally reserved for God's people, the Jews, to these unclean people. It is a radical departure from standard practice. God is saying, "yes, even them – these loathsome ones are my people, too, and they belong to my covenant of new life."

It leads to the line which may be familiar that describes God's radical new universal outreach to all the people of the world: *For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

This radical call for what would seem universal inclusiveness is clearly a message that is lost on the people of the time. This is no surprise. God often talks about God's people needing to do things that they simply don't do.

This is patently clear when we find Jesus in Matthew's story encountering a Canaanite woman, or in Isaiah's terms, a foreigner. She comes to him, begging to have him heal her daughter of a terrible demonic possession. Jesus plainly and deliberately **ignores** her. The woman doesn't stop crying out to Jesus and the disciples.

The disciples tell Jesus to send her away, perhaps to give her what she wants and be done with her. Jesus replies: *I was sent only to the lost house of Israel.* In effect, he is saying that his mission is not to the Gentiles, the foreigners, only to the Jews. This seems strange to us because Jesus reaches out to all without distinction, to the rich and the poor, the righteous and the sinner, the tax collector and the temple leader. Here Jesus has drawn a line and he seems determined to stick with it.

This Canaanite woman is no wallflower. Her daughter is demon-possessed and she needs help. None of the others she has contacted have helped at all. She believes that Jesus will bring her daughter the healing she needs. She starts to get in Jesus' face, kneeling in front of him and presumably blocking his path. He tells her: *It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.* The children are the Jews and the dogs are the Gentiles like this woman. Jesus is telling her she is no more than a dog in the eyes of God. It would be contrary to God's will for Jesus to give to her and her daughter the healing and salvation that has been "reserved" for God's covenant people.

But the woman comes right back at him and says: *Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.* Buzz-Zing! Jesus gets zapped by the woman's comments. She admits that Gentiles like her are not participants in the

covenant of God. But she insists on her place within the creation of God. She claims God's love, grace, and care *even if* she stands outside the covenant. She challenges Jesus to deny her that standing before God. Jesus is slam-dunk shut-up.

Jesus realizes that she is (hate to admit it) right. No, she is not part of the covenant, yet she is part of God's creation. Besides, her witness of faith in Jesus and in the power of God is quite evident. Jesus replies, *'Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted.'* *And her daughter was healed.*

Jesus's first response to the woman lacked any empathy at all. He calls her and her daughter – her people – foreigners – dogs. Her response engages him exactly where he is. Okay, if we're dogs, then even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall. She knew where his head was and she met him on his terms. Using his own phrase, she turns it on him and Jesus is awakened to the reality of her life before God. Before that moment, she was a thing, a dog, not even human enough to be considered. After that moment, she was recognized as a child of God.

Scholars recognize this as a turning point in Jesus' ministry. We recall that first commission that sent out the disciples. Then Jesus told them to go nowhere among the Samaritans and the Gentiles, only to the house of Israel. Their mission was exclusive. We don't have the Great Commission without this encounter with the Canaanite woman. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 that concludes the gospel tells the disciples to go and make disciples of **all** nations and peoples.

It took this determined woman **to teach Jesus** about God and the place of other people besides the Jews as having genuine value in the eyes of God. She was able to evoke empathy where there had been none, and that changed everything. Jesus realizes: "yes, even her."

To be able to truly imagine the life of another takes considerable effort, breaking apart our cherished beliefs, our traditional notions, and our pre-conceived biases about how things are. The effort is called empathy, and it can be transformative. It opens new vistas and gets us to check our own experience of life with greater care and discernment. Jesus got a lesson about God from a strange, persistent foreigner who caught his attention by her skillful response, changing his understanding of her and of God, and even of his Kingdom mission.

It is radical to be as inclusive as God declared in Isaiah. We're more likely to be tribal, guarded, and selective. Whether we're considering people of different political or social viewpoints, even extreme negative ones like the white nationalists in Charlottesville, God is ready to teach us when we throw up our defenses. When we want to block them out and keep them out of our lives, God says: "Yes, even **them**." Of course, God has already said to **us**, "Yes, even you."