

Sermon: Year A, Proper 15

Texts: Isaiah 56:1-8

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

If you were to look up the texts appointed to be read today according to the Revised Common Lectionary, you would find that the lectionary excludes several verses of the reading from the book of Isaiah – verses that I chose to add back in. It probably wouldn't take you long to figure out what the lectionary editors chose to omit. One word is enough: eunuchs. If your ears were tuned to Isaiah's turns of phrase, he was fairly blunt about their unfortunate condition. It's language that can be a bit clumsy for public reading. I'll let you reread it on your own, if you'd like to be reminded of just how earthy the prophets could be. God was not presented to Israel in lovely abstractions, the kind of approach to which we've become accustomed, when God seems to be our way of referring to big ideas that float far above the muddles of real life or to the sentiments and dreams that provide us moments of personal inspiration or consolation. For Israel, God's presence was far more intense and integral. God addressed them, often alarmingly, within the most excruciatingly intimate circumstances of their lives.

In keeping with our modern preoccupations with high-mindedness, however, especially in the church, the lectionary editors seem to have felt that reference to eunuchs had no real relevance anymore. Eunuchs have certainly ceased to have an official role in our society, as they did in ancient times. In fact, they probably seem to us to be an utterly strange phenomenon, embarrassing, and the editors might have feared that mention of them would prove too distracting. They may have thought that Isaiah's text would be more immediately instructive if they limited its reference to the issues that we still encounter. Welcoming foreigners is challenge enough. We probably assumed already years ago, that tribalism had been relegated to the past, but as so many conflicts today show, it is still insidiously present and no less active. Living as we do, in an increasingly global context, inclusiveness, then, has become the unquestioned and supreme virtue of our age, and, in response, the text from Isaiah, as appointed, seems to share nicely the same ideal. "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." It's a message that is, undoubtedly, crucial to our wellbeing.

But something – even more essential – is lost when we omit Isaiah's reference to eunuchs. These verses were not addendums. They form the very center of Isaiah's proclamation. For what he was proclaiming was not primarily our own ethical responsibility, how we should act and in what manner we should treat one another – as important as this is. What was even more central for Isaiah was finding an adequate description of what the promise of God is, and thereby declaring what is the very substance of our hope and the destiny that makes our subsequent actions meaningful.

For Isaiah, eunuchs represented a very distinct hopelessness, one that couldn't be remedied. They were fundamentally damaged people because they were not able to procreate. And thus they no longer shared with others the same marks of being "made in the image of God." They lived on the other side of this possibility, defined by the term impossible. They would never have offspring. No children. No continuing line. No one to whom they could pass on something of

themselves, written most intimately in flesh. Of all persons, they were physically, ontologically, among the least. Isaiah's words are graphic: "Behold," – look! – "I am a dry tree."

This wasn't a matter of ethics, informing us how eunuchs were to be treated or whether they were to be accepted. This was a matter of being, of who they were and what could not be changed. And it was to this fundamental impossibility that Isaiah tied God's promise. What they would receive by God's determination is not directly named but, Isaiah said, it would surpass even sons and daughters. It would be standing of such an order that even what was most agonizingly impossible now would be shown, in redemption, to be overwhelmed by the restorative power of God's goodness.

This is the greater drama – of divine covenant more than our ethical duties – and it marks the presence of God, which Isaiah then immediately tied to the keeping of the Sabbath. To keep the Sabbath was not – as we so poorly tend to think – the dull task of following religious rules one day a week (getting up to come to church, one more obligation that eats away your own time). It was, rather, to literally spend one's time, one day in seven, literally rejoicing in God, in what is, and, crucially, in what will be, imagining now within our own lives the form of God's salvation with such vividness that the rest of the week might be transformed – from the mundane stresses of simply getting things done to the beauty of consciously bearing witness to God's inimitable grace. Which begs the question: on which side of this divide do you think you live?

Keeping the Sabbath is not a task, one more activity that can be checked off. (This week I made the effort, but next week I have other plans). It's an extraordinary leap, from out of the usual confines of your own life, all the things that you have to do or want to accomplish, into the space of God's promise, addressed to us with no less directness or intimacy than it was to the eunuchs of Isaiah's time. Sundays slowly become the Sabbath when we can think of worship and fellowship as time outside time, never hurried by other agendas, because we are much more absorbed stretching toward the realization of our eternal future. This is, admittedly, a more expansive vision than what we usually have in mind as we set out for church, but, apart from this, apart from our celebration of God's visceral presence with us and the redemption that is the destiny we share, all our ethical ideals fail and inclusiveness and welcome never truly extend beyond the specific tribes we choose to approve, the persons we are willing to accept as admirable, enjoyable, or, at the edges, tolerable. For there will always be some left out – the eunuchs of our day.

We need to hear the verses omitted.

Christianity is a marvelously complex faith – which it should and must be if it is to adequately address the reality of our lives. But years in ministry have served to convince me, more and more, that at its very core, Christianity begins and ends with one, single and essential expression, which Isaiah names, which is joy. Which is the heart of the Sabbath. The whole spectrum of our experiences can then follow, from the depths of tragic suffering to the heights of ecstatic exuberance, but, as Saint Paul would remind us, in all these things, in any and all circumstances, joy remains constant, always reverberating – sometimes complementing our happiness, sometimes stubbornly contesting our grief. But it is never absent. And apart from this joy, when

anything else takes precedence, then Christianity becomes just one more religion – a tradition like so many others, one more code of behavior, just another staid set of rituals.

Joy, however, is easy to talk about too breezily. It's hard to actually realize. We speak often of it without ever appreciating just how particular it is. Interestingly, it's a word that has few, true synonyms. Delight may come close, but it's more conditional. Gladness doesn't have the same gravity or acuity. Elation seems almost to fit, but unlike elation, joy can be somber without being diminished. If you try to nail down precisely what joy means, it continues to surprise by revealing another facet, an even greater resilience, and a depth that, finally, seems impossible to plumb – infinite. True joy proves to be inexhaustible and uncontainable. And in this way, what joy is is the revelation of God's presence in our world. It isn't an emotion, a feeling or a mood. Joy is more like exposure. It's what we experience when we forget ourselves and rediscover the world and all time as God's gift which is moving always toward God's promise, where all things come to fruition... where even dry trees bear fruit.

If we trust that this is indeed God's promise, if we trust this enough to spend literally one day in seven literally exploring, uncovering, and practicing divine joy, then inclusiveness will cease to be an ideal. It will be the particularly strange and wonderful gift of the church, our gift, to the world – in God's name and to God's glory. It will be witness to what Sabbath truly is and who we can truly be – people living the image of God.

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