

Delighting in God's Welcome (21Aug16)
Luke13:10-17; Isaiah58:9b-14

Here's the story: religious leaders had excluded a person from congregational participation, claiming this person was of a category unfit for God's presence. Later—unfortunately much later—through Jesus this person is welcomed to the community, which is met both by popular acclaim but also by lingering resentments from the authorities.

This week, as we're preparing for the Pride Parade, I'm having difficulty not seeing this Gospel story as a pretty precise parallel for how the church has treated LGBT folks over the past decades. It's not an exact analogy; the Bible story is termed an exorcism or healing, while very clearly particular sexual orientations or gender identities are not wrongs that need to be fixed.

Yet still, it seems sadly uncanny how people who are lesbian, gay, transgender, and all kinds of queer have been condemned and pushed out of churches for years and years, being told you are not welcome, that the Bible's regulations are against you, even that "God hates fags." Then gradually, much too long later, came reversal, as some especially open-eyed churches—those who were best-attuned to the need for and prevalence of God's grace, prevailing amid all of our lives that are too quick to condemn others in order to call ourselves okay—some communities gradually began offering a welcome and bucking the trend and rejecting the dominant and domineering regulations. And the broader popular culture—including some who will be lining State Street this afternoon—cheered this reversal even as some church authorities sought to slow the process or dragged their feet and grumbled through the change, or simply were put to shame by those with richer faith and compassion.

I said I was having difficulty not seeing this Bible story through this lens, and I really am feeling it as a difficulty. It's not in the least that I regret the welcome. I don't have doubts about God's grace or believe we're doing the wrong thing. I rejoice that we are a Reconciling in Christ congregation and find it a faithful necessity to have that rainbow logo with our identity. I'm eager to keep pushing our synod to fuller inclusion. That's all well and good (other, again, than the regrettable delay of "what took us so long?").

My difficulty in hearing the Bible story this way is the risk of just being self-congratulatory, that we pat ourselves on the back as those who get it, and we shake our heads at the feet-dragging grumblers who continue in shame. We don't come to church just to applaud ourselves for being so welcoming or for proclaiming that God isn't a narrow-minded jerk.

Partly it's because we still have work to do. "All are welcome" may be exactly true as a theological statement, of the doors being open and the good news offered to all, of the Lord's Supper as gifts given and shed for all. But that blanket welcome on God's part doesn't yet mean we do it well on our part. Pastor Sonja pushes this better than I, that if this weren't just my place but were for all, then my way wouldn't get to dominate as if it's "right," whether that's for race or gender or learning style or ability level or age or musical taste or whatever. It raises the question for us: if God's welcome is broadly offered and only true when it is enacted for all, then how do our practices and attitudes join that, and how are we the foot-dragging impediments of religious institution?

That propels us actually deeper into the content of this Gospel reading, and even more so the reading from Isaiah. In the Gospel story, there clearly seem to be sides, with the woman

and the crowd and Jesus on one side versus the congregational leader and others as opponents. Rather than just inviting you to pick which side you want to be on, though, Isaiah prompts it by confronting your behavior. Specifically, verse 13 begins with a pair of contrasting very big "IFs": "IF you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; IF you call the sabbath a delight..."

Let's come back to the IF in a moment, but first pause to notice something spectacular: according to this in Isaiah, the purpose of this day is for delight. It's a beautiful description—sabbath is not identified simply for rest or to go to worship, but for the delight God created you to enjoy. This day is so that your soul may sing. This is so that you may know freedom. It's to release whatever distracts you and exactly to cure today what confines you, even if for a time, so you can glimpse a vision of a broader and better life, and praise God for it. Today is so you can delight.

To be part of this godly delight is very obviously not fulfilling regulations or requirements you need to do just right. It's not how you worship (like how well you sing or what you say in your prayers, much less the right clothes or amount of offering). It's not try out where you need to fit in so well, as if your welcome comes at the expense of somebody else, as if you're better than others in some holy quality or another. Your delight is not dependent on your behavior, or conditional on how you feel about it. The delight of being uplifted arises exactly because you are never excluded by anything you've done. Never. Any aspect, good or bad: "your quirks, your questions, and your queerness... In baptism, you were claimed as a precious child of your Creator."* The value of the day is that

precisely—each in our very own ways—we need it. We need this chance to delight, because we've been crippled for too long and held in bondage for too long and keep worrying we're not good or worthy enough, or have been told we don't measure up. So you need this sabbath day, whose point isn't what you do but is what you enjoy, realize, and delight in!

That also brings us back to the IF of Isaiah and the conflict in the Gospel story. The critical question in both is IF we're just using this day for our own self-interested advantage. That can be hard to judge, if we're delighting selfishly or more communally. For example, it's supposed to be a day of rest; so if you get a weekend break with your family or a few moments of quiet amid the hectic week, is that delight worthwhile? Does that fit Isaiah's criteria? Or, again, if you really enjoy singing Tom Hind's liturgy in worship, is that delight for praising God, or is it that the tunes are catchy and choral singing releases endorphins that make you feel good and harmonious? Would that still count, since it remains far from Isaiah's warning against "trampling on the sabbath"?

Maybe for more clarity we could ask this: Do we say we are so welcoming and loving, open and supportive because we like the old familiar faces of friends, or are we really ready for strangers and people who don't look or act like us?

See, the delight is this broad, shared experience that is an engagement communing with who God created you to be and also in relationship with others as God created *them* to be. That's bound to push you and make you open up some fresh edges. Again, this is the shape of things when we say that "all are welcome." It doesn't mean they're allowed in if they look and act like you and know what you know and vote how you vote and keep quiet when you want them to. All are welcome means

* Thanksgiving for Baptism,
<http://www.reconcilingworks.org/ric/ricsunday/download/>

all, and it means a welcome from God, but also insists on welcome from us. Jesus sees you and reaches out to touch you, to offer you life. But you can't block his vision or interrupt him reaching out to others who also need him. It's impossible to secure more blessing by pushing aside or trampling others down, since we receive delight from God as we are receiving each other with delight.

Still more, this isn't just embodied as we huddle amid a friendly little group at church, not just one hour a week we're nice to each other, not just a shelter and refuge from surrounding nastiness. The delight of this gathering for God's sabbath spreads out from here and across the world as the consummation of creation. For the brokenness and fractures that divide us in condemning each other, for sorrows that burden and devastations wracking and attempting to destroy our spirit, this godly delight is on the loose, the abundance of life, the fullness encountered in relationship, with Jesus and with each other. This is perhaps summarized in one of my favorite lines from the whole Bible. I even happened to reference it last week before noticing the verse would be included this week. It's Isaiah 58:12: "You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." Wow. Could there be a better title for fostering shared delight?

This is a gathering where all are welcome, because God created all for delight, so you should have access to inspiration and rejuvenation and joy, and so should all others. But it doesn't rest in this gathering alone. If you've missed church, you miss something wonderful and important, but you haven't missed out on God or lost a ticket to some belated heavenly bliss. Rather, this is simply where we begin to live into God's vision for our very present world, where delight isn't confined to the worthy few, but spreads and is

recognized by popular acclaim. This delight will march up State Street to reconcile the breach we have caused and felt. And then godly delight must continue on to the troubled streets of Milwaukee and charging through the closed doors of politicians-for-hire and is a deluge of repairs for Louisiana homes. And such delight must sweep away the rubble around a small, stunned Syrian boy and it resounds on the breeze with cicada calls and purges us like a baptismal rain and renews after raging fires. And, yes, all too often God's delight has needed to bowl over shameful religious people exactly like us who have preferred to squander it or imagined it could be bottled up in individual serving sizes for your self-interest and pious-pretending pursuits. But there's a cure for that, too.

The fullness of God's blessing is for you, because you are part of God's good creation. You are welcome here. Let's sing it, better than I can say it.

Hymn: *All Are Welcome* (ELW 641)

Rooted in Christ and rising to serve, let us pray for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

Lord of the sabbath, we delight in being gathered here today, and we pray for your diverse church in all places.

We also pray for reconciliation and welcome for those who have too long been excluded from your delight and ask your forgiveness and theirs. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of watered gardens, we beg to participate in the consummation of your creation, and while appreciating a cool morning, we pray especially this week for places with too much or too little rain, Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

It's an amazing vocation that we would be called repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in. Enable this good work for places of violence and harm, inside political and prison walls, through all brokenness and up and down every street, that your delight may spread. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

In the brokenness of our own lives, we long for you to see

us and for your touch to cure us today. In all the silent ways of worry, find us. In our sickness, heal us. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

On this sabbath, we pray for worship for those who need it. We pray for rest for those who are weary. We pray for delight for all, to spread in our lives and beyond.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

(students to college,

Margaret Helming & Joe Powell, Tina Hogle, Don & Nancy Tubesing, Gina Utrie, Scott Quincey & Alex; and Gretchen & Al Wahl

Ken Johnson, Bill Long, Donna Leet,

Evelyn Mazack's mother, our intern Jessica Laux's newborn niece Audrey

rejoice with Hollis Rudiger

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Our stories are shaped in community. We thank you for all people of all kinds who have witnessed to your love, and *this week we continue to remember Joyce Anderson, Irene Rasmussen, and Lynn Breedlove's mother.* Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting your promise to hear us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

HEBREWS SERMONS

TOM UPDATES

PRIDE

CAMPUS MINISTRY

EVICTED

BIRTHDAYS