

Pride Sunday (16Aug2020)
from Isaiah 56, Matthew 15, Romans 11

Not exactly warning labels, but two caveats for this sermon.

First, it'll be kinda PG-13, but I hope you don't take that as meaning inappropriate. If you have younger children or it's otherwise uncomfortable, I hope we do discuss this anyway.

Second, it's Pride Sunday, and I struggle with how to approach that. Most of us may identify as straight and as cisgender, meaning what our bodies look like is also how the inside of us tells us who we are. I look like a boy and feel like a boy, and I'm in love with a girl.

But that's not all of us, and praise God for that! Talking about "us" includes people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer in whatever way. (Those are what the letters LGBTQ+ stand for, if you needed a reminder or clarification.)

So my second non-warning-label caveat is that I want this sermon to be for the real "us" and not further "us and them." But I'll have to invite you to stick with me to get there.

See, these great Bible readings happened to arrive along with Pride Sunday. They deal a lot with "us and them," insiders and outsiders. But they also queer the meaning, making it not so easy to presume who the insiders are and what it's like to be an outsider.

Romans takes the group known as "the chosen people" and wonders if they've been un-chosen, superseded by the Gentiles, the new converts, and if the Jewish people have been rejected by God. For one reversal of insiders and outsiders, Paul says another reversal will bring in everyone. God's promise is unbreakable.

The prophet Isaiah beautifully portrays insiders, too, with two categories of people who had been excluded: foreigners and eunuchs, people with a genital deformity.

This part of Isaiah was after returning from exile, as life and worship were resuming. Broad xenophobic tendencies in the culture then were maybe not without reason, as the nation was trying

to recover. There also might've been an encouragement to "be fruitful and multiply" to restore the population after it was depleted, and so those who couldn't reproduce could've been viewed adversely with reservations.

Yet Isaiah says they're going to be totally welcomed in. God's house is a house of prayer for all people, all nations. The eunuchs weren't as good as dead for inability to reproduce, but have an everlasting name, even more than being called sons or daughters.

Here is where the caveats come in, my non-warning-labels. I'm taking a deep breath, because it's unusual for me to talk about. Even without having to look you in the eye, I squirm. Yet both for relevance today and for understanding Isaiah, it's important to know that a eunuch is a person with no penis. Someone without a penis would usually be considered a woman. But this is not a woman. We could say a eunuch had their penis cut off. But I described them as a person and not a man, because they were not identified as a man. A eunuch was an other, not a man or a woman. They didn't fit the standard binary of gender.

That was my first PG-13 caveat.

Now to the second caveat for Pride Sunday. Isaiah proclaims that these otherly-gendered people are surely part of God's family and have a place in the worshipping community, fully included. Not only that; it's a special place, more than typical daughters and sons (notably, that's standard binary gender).

Since the church has been so awful to LGBTQ+ people, not only to exclude from the worshipping community much too often, but being the loudest voices of condemnation within secular culture, as well, a tendency on occasions like Pride Sunday is to work on explanations about how we should include people who are LGBTQ, singling them out. It makes another us and them, which may not leave outsiders but still "others," which seems to not really be a full inclusion but sort of a peripheral admission.

So I want us to hear Isaiah. Isaiah says our gender norms are too small to identify insiders. More than that, these people are centered. If

Isaiah's culture and then the church was slow to understand and act on that, God wasn't. God says, this is exactly who I want. I want you.

The Gospel has more us and them, more questioning of who is the insider and outsider. It's in the first part about Pharisees. (That section was optional, but I kept it in so we would hear the reminder of caution on what comes out of our mouths.)

We probably most notice the story of the Canaanite woman. She wanted to be brought in to Jesus' goodness, or wanted her daughter to be.

We could ask where we see ourselves in this story, and what role we end up assigning to others.

That might direct us back to the second caveat. One lens on Pride Sunday would say Jesus and his followers came around to inviting in those who had been excluded, and to use that on gay and trans folks. Remember, though, they were already "in" by Isaiah's time 500 years before Jesus, so let's take that off our agenda.

Instead, let me tell you about my mother. I was in a fairly fundamentalist youth group in high school. It was popular, my friends were part of it, the youth director ran with our cross country team practices, and so on. After I graduated, because I was into church and stayed in town for college, I kept on as a leader. That group made me pretty fiercely anti-gay, or as we'd more fully say now, anti-LGBTQ.

First, I apologize. Maybe that's part of what leads me to work diligently as an ally and advocate now. But I was messed up and was part of the problem.

My mom didn't appreciate it. She didn't feel that was right. It was the wrong way for me to be. She tried to argue and convince me and cut out newspaper clippings to get me to understand differently and change my adamant attitude.

I don't know much about my mom's prayer life, other than she considers prayer important. I don't even know fully how I define prayer. But in this instance, I'd at least regard her persistence as prayer. With a Gospel story about a woman pleading for her child, I'll also say the Canaanites were seen as outsiders and opponents of God's

work. So my mother was pleading for the inclusion of me, the rotten little Canaanite.

God could've given up on me, as not worth goodness. Somehow, grace came toward me, and I got brought in. The demon was driven out. I was healed to be part of God's work.

I hope you hear that as a story of redemption and inclusion. But I don't like leaving a sermon as a story about me, because sermons are for you. Each of you.

So maybe a moral of the story is that people are praying for you, hoping, wanting life to be full. And you have a God for whom nobody is ever too far outside the bounds to be brought in. Your God does not see you as needing to be kept excluded, for any reason, but is continually working for fullness of life, to celebrate you. Systemic oppression and a global pandemic and the stresses of life may get in the way. Worse, the church and I may sometimes interfere with what God is striving to do.

But in the end, know that God's plan is to celebrate you, to delight in you, to ensure that you are brought in to exactly the good place you should be.