

## Belonging with God's Gathered People

### Isaiah 56:1-8 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. <sup>2</sup> Blessed is the one who does this— the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps their hands from doing any evil." <sup>3</sup> Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." <sup>4</sup> For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant— <sup>5</sup> to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. <sup>6</sup> And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— <sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." <sup>8</sup> The Sovereign LORD declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."

Leading up to our section of Isaiah today, we had the amazing prophecy that the servant of the LORD would be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, that the punishment that brings us peace would be on him and that by his wounds we would be healed. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6) And what does this cost us? God gives an invitation to all that we would own this without paying money, without cost to us. So, we are all told to seek the LORD and belong to him because he paid the price.

Yet, God knew that some people would hang their heads because they did not see how they could have a place with the LORD. These are God's people, the Israelites, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I don't have that bloodline. I'm a foreigner. Others, eunuchs, single people with no hope of having kids, knew that their status in life meant that they would not have a lasting name. Without kids, you had no inheritance, no permanent stake among God's people. Any property they had would go away when they died, and their memory would be soon forgotten. Foreigners and eunuchs felt like they would have no belonging with the LORD and his people.

Plenty of people feel that way today for so many reasons. If you were at the Everyone Outreach workshop back in January, you know that there are a myriad of reasons why people have not felt welcomed at a church. Some see political bumper stickers or hear political talk and think that you have to be a member of one political party or another to belong to this church. It might be that everyone roots for the same NFL team and if you don't, you can't belong. Others have felt they aren't welcome when their efforts in setting up Christmas decorations were not good enough because someone else rearranged them later or when they're told that they can't help make the coffee in the morning because they're not a member. It can even be a bulletin announcement that directs you to a person without any of their contact information listed and people feel excluded because they don't know who that is.

These may not seem like major things and yet they have made people feel like they don't belong. What are the things that we do which make people feel like a foreigner who doesn't belong to God's people? Do we have customs and traditions, unspoken expectations, that we are blind to because we are so used to them but then the newcomer doesn't get what's going on? How does this order of service thing work? Where are the bathrooms? Where is that coffee you mentioned? Are the brownies for everyone?

Do we make single people feel like they don't have a place like eunuchs did? Do we say things like we have to set them up, that they need to meet a nice boy or girl? Do we give them the impression that their life is lesser than, incomplete, if they are not in a romantic relationship? Do we pity them with thoughts or words like, "Oh, it's a shame that they are single."? Do we make single people feel like they can't belong to God and his people because they don't have kids, don't have a romantic relationship?

Do they belong? God unequivocally says: Yes! Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." (verse 3)

Well, how do they belong? The LORD had already paved that way for all people with the suffering servant. Jesus, the Messiah, God's own Son, reconciles us to God, takes away our sin, makes peace between us and God, heals our incompleteness by making us complete with him. In time, in history, this is the salvation that was close at hand in Isaiah's day. We have read the accounts that God has given us righteousness by the life and works of Jesus Christ. He offers this relationship, this belonging, to all people. He gives it through the proclamation of what he has done for us. Faith in God, belonging to him, comes through hearing this message.

When God bring us to faith in him, we are changed. We want to sing his praises for this new relationship. More than that, we want to maintain justice, do what is right. We want to hold to his Word, to hear it, keep the Sabbath, love the name of the LORD by spending time reading and studying his Word both here on Sunday mornings with other people and every day at home for ourselves. We want to be the LORD's servant and choose what pleases God. These are all fruits of our faith in God, natural products of our faith showing that we belong to him.

This is especially for people who feel like foreigners and eunuchs. For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant— to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." (verses 4-7)

That's true for every single one of us. Some of us have been born and raised in a Lutheran church. Others of us have come here and joined later as adults. Some here today are probably wondering, "Do I belong here?" The great thing about the family of God is that you only need one thing to belong: the LORD. You need what he has done for you. You need his perfect life lived for you. You need his innocent suffering endured and death died for you. You need his victorious resurrection accomplished for you. It doesn't matter your background, your history. It doesn't matter your past or current sins. All of them are paid for by Christ. He is the one who brings us to belong to God, joined with all other believers.

In fact, have you thought about what happens in a baptism? We wash people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, the LORD is putting his name on you. He is adopting you into his family. You might see people occasionally making the sign of the cross on themselves while worshiping. This is their way of remembering who they are, to whom they belong. They have the name of God on them, an everlasting name, a belonging that is theirs now and gives them a place with God here and in heaven forever!

The LORD says through Isaiah later on what this everlasting name is. After accomplishing salvation for us, the LORD says that he bestows a new name on his people, "No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married." (Isaiah 62:4) That name Hephzibah means "My delight is in her." Beulah means "Married." God's name for you, this everlasting name, is that he delights in you, that you are married to him, belong to him, are a part of his family along with your brothers and sisters in Christ. You are not alone. You are loved. You are complete. You are whole by the name, the belonging that God has given to you, and this is forever.

This is how we are to talk about foreigners, those who are new to our gathering of believers. This is how we are to talk about those who are single. You are complete. You are whole. You are blessed. In fact, singleness is a gift from God and we all start that way – even if you wish you had a romantic relationship right now. What you do have right now is God and a different kind of committed relationship because he is committed to us. He has made us his people, people for you to lean on, people that we belong to. Whether married or single, God has given us belonging.

As far as making new people feel less like foreigners and more like they belong, we're going to have a hard time figuring out our blind spots and whether or not we are welcoming unless we are actually talk to people who are new to us. When they tell us what is welcoming and what's not, we can change. So, instead of putting up a sign that says our congregation welcomes everyone, what will you do to help someone feel welcome here? Who is someone new that you can ask what makes them feel welcome? Was it when someone asked to sit with them? Was it when someone greeted them at the door? Was it when someone showed them the flow of our worship? Was it when someone invited them for coffee and goodies after worship? Was it simply introducing yourself and asking questions of them, showing interest in them? And if you're still floundering as to what you can do to make someone feel welcome, then think about what made you feel welcome here. Can you do those same things for someone else? How can we make people feel like they belong here? What will you do today and what will you do next Sunday to make that happen?

The LORD has brought us together. He is our connection point – not relationship status or how long we've been a Lutheran, just Jesus. He wanted us and did everything to make us full and complete. And he has done that for all. The Sovereign LORD declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered." (verse 8) More are being gathered. More are being given a belonging to God. How will we help make them feel welcomed, that they belong with us, just like someone did for you? We do that to God's glory and for the building up of his Church, his people, to whom we belong. Amen.