

*All Are Worthy, All Are Welcome*

Isaiah 56:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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I welcome you all to today's special worship service, especially our guest from the transgender community and their allies. We are a small church but as Margaret Mead observed, a small number of people can change the world. We at Spirit of Peace want to use our powers for good, so a significant aspect of our mission has been to identify allies in the wider community with whom we can work but perhaps more importantly with whom we can share fellowship. Our society can be so task-oriented that it's easy to forget that it's not our work but our relationships that make us human. Who you break bread with is important. We have broken bread with many groups over the years, and this time we felt called in particular to welcome and bless and break bread with those in the transgender community and their allies. We are very aware that for some of you to even come here was a tremendous act of courage and trust on your part, so believe me when I say we are very honored by your presence with us today, and we are grateful for the blessing you share with us just by being here.

Our society seems to thrive on polarization, on drawing sharp lines that divide us from one another, as if the side you take on a particular issue is more important than the people you live among. Many, many lines get drawn including lines that define what is really "Christian" and what is not. We at Spirit of Peace are Christian, but our understanding of what that means differs sometimes from how Christianity seems to get treated in the popular media. So today we want to take this opportunity to share how we tell our story and how each of us gathered here, both regular attenders and first-time guests, are all important to that story. Because we do see our faith not as a simple list of rules or doctrines that remain unchanging for all time, but as a story that we tell over and over again. A story whose basic themes are the same, but the details adapt depending on who is talking and who is listening, and what is going on in the world at the time.

This view of faith is not new. It exists in the Bible itself. If you were to read the Bible from start to finish, you would find that the same story gets told and retold, but in different times and places, new understandings of it emerge. The first passage we heard today from Isaiah is an excellent example of this. Isaiah is really a flash point in the Bible, when the old, familiar stories get told in new ways with new understandings.

This passage may be familiar to those in the LGBT community. Here is the larger context for it. Within the book of Isaiah itself, the kingdom of Israel has been conquered by foreign invaders, and the people carried away into exile. In the latter chapters of the book, including this passage, the prophet is talking about the coming day when God will bring those exiles back to the homeland and rebuild the nation. But not just a political entity or government, more importantly a community, a people, the people of God.

The Hebrews used to have a very strict definition of who could count as part of the people of God. They had been slaves in Egypt, and God brought them out into freedom and made them into a new people. Books like Deuteronomy and Leviticus spelled out in great detail who could be a citizen and what were the conditions of citizenship. Foreigners were not eligible. Sounds like some anti-immigrant people today! The word translated here as "foreigner" is "gentile," which we tend to think of as meaning non-Jews, but it literally means nations, ethnicities, peoples. In other words, everyone who is not Jewish. Foreigners could live and work among Jews, but they could never become Jewish because they were foreigners, aliens. How is that for circular logic?

Among other things, one of the criteria for Jewish citizenship was the ability to procreate, to have children. This was, after all, a new nation of people who wanted to out-populate everyone else. So all good Jews had a religious obligation to make babies. Women who had no children had little or no standing in Jewish society. Men who were incapable of fathering children for whatever reason, through an injury, or they had been made eunuchs, could not be Jews. Hence the law that no eunuch, no damaged male, could even enter the temple of God. And such had been more or less the understanding for centuries.

And now, it's not that God changed, but the circumstances of the people changed and they gained new insight. The prophet Isaiah in the face of this exile, when they had lost their homeland, their temple, their national identity, looks around at what they have lost and imagines what might be rebuilt. And it occurs to him that maybe they've gotten it wrong about what it really means to be the people of God. Maybe it matters less if you were born into the community or can procreate. Maybe some things matter more: maintaining justice and doing what is right. Keeping the Sabbath and refraining from doing evil.

Keeping the Sabbath gets mentioned a lot in this passage, and it may seem like a strange thing to be harping on. But in a recent sermons series on human rights, I talked about how slaves do not get time off. They do not get a day of rest, and that is why the Sabbath is so important. The Ten Commandments spell out that everyone has a right to this day off: men and women, slaves and free people, foreigners, even animals. So keeping Sabbath means not exploiting or using anyone. It means everyone has a right to this dignity. The Sabbath *is* the temple of God's people, and everyone who keeps the Sabbath, that is, who honors God and respects one another, who does justice and refrains from evil, who treats people right, *that's* what defines the people of God. Old truth, but a new insight.

So Isaiah says, "Don't let foreigners say, 'God will separate me from the people' or eunuchs say, 'I am a dry tree.' God says if you keep the Sabbath and hold fast my covenant, I will give to eunuchs a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I'll bring foreigners to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" – note that verse, Jesus quotes it in the gospels. And in particular hear this: "Thus says the Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel – I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." That, right there, in our denomination, in the UCC and at Spirit of Peace, that is what we call God's extravagant welcome. Every week as we gather around the communion table, we say, "All are worthy, all are welcome."

Not all Christians would interpret that passage that way, and that's cool. But it is essential to *this* community of faith. In the retreat recently with Dr. Parks, that was the number one thing members of our church said, that if we lost that extravagant welcome, we would no longer be Spirit of Peace Church. That is why we always reach out, why in particular we invited friends from the transgender community and allies, and why we are so glad that you accepted our invitation. Not just so we could be good hosts, but because the people of God will never be complete without each and every one.

And here is where we turn to Paul. Paul is not always a favorite. He said some spectacularly...well, I hesitate to say *stupid* things, but when I read, "Let women keep silent in the churches," I say, "Yes, brother, you tell yourself that; I know better." We probably all have examples of such sayings of Paul, and the LGBT community has a few choice ones. But for me, we're all human, even Paul. We all have blinders. None of us sees everything clearly. As for Paul, when I'm being charitable, I say he sometimes gets distracted by trivial details. So do I! But when he got it right, he got it *so* right. And this passage is everything I love about Paul -- not only does he get it right, but he's astonishingly down to earth, and downright earthy here!

The larger context: like Isaiah before him, Paul is defining the community, what defines and identifies the people of God. And folks in the church were saying, “My spiritual gift is more important than yours.” In other words, my role is more important. *I* am more important. And Paul says, “No, no, no. No one spiritual gift is more important than another, any more than one person is more important than another.” And he switches from a lofty discussion of spiritual gifts to this earthy discussion of a body.

The body is made up of very different parts. Each is unique, but each is essential for the functioning of the whole body. The people of God, the community of faith, is like a body, and all those parts in all their diversity, just as they are, are needed. The foot can’t say, “Because I’m not a hand I don’t belong.” Because I’m not straight. Because I’m not married. Because I don’t have a degree. Because I don’t have a car. Because I’m not sober. Because I’m not perfect. There are those lines that divide again! How many ways do churches exclude people? How many ways do people believe they are not worthy? But Paul says, “No, no, no! The foot can’t say, ‘Because I’m not a hand I don’t belong.’” But just as important, the hand cannot say to the foot, “I have no need of you.” You see? It’s not just that we’re all different, but that we are needed. Our very differences, they are *needed!* Every time the church says of anyone, “We have no need of you” – ooh! Then we fail to be the church. Because we need each and every one, just as they are.

And Paul goes on. Every metaphor will break down if you push it far enough, and Paul pushes this one to the breaking point, but like I said, that’s why I love him. “The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,” he says. In body parts that might be your little toe. Those fine bones in the ear. The bacteria in your stomach. Gross! But if that stuff gets out of whack, you realize how truly indispensable it is. Now this metaphor breaks down because people do have physical disabilities, but that’s not what Paul is talking about here. Rather, who are the people who are sometimes seen as weaker? Children? The elderly? Someone who is weak in faith? Someone who is weak in life, battling addiction or depression or mental illness. Weak perhaps. But unworthy? The weakest link? Vote them off the island? No, Paul says. Indispensable! How would that change our view of the church?

But Paul doesn’t stop there. Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor. Now, what body parts might be less honorable? Lord, help me. Y’all love it when I’m shameless in the pulpit, right? I could throw this question out to you. I have a two year old. He is not yet potty trained. Those functions and the parts involved – maybe not so honorable. That’s why we carry out those functions in private, discreetly. Other things as well, like chewing with your mouth closed. Covering your face when you sneeze. Picking your nose. Not really honorable, not really fit for polite society. But Paul says, “No! In the church, we clothe these things with greater honor!”

So what might be the human equivalent? I’m going to get in trouble here. Think about that TV show, “The World’s Dirtiest Jobs.” Do we honor sanitation workers? No. But if we didn’t have them, we’d be in deep...trouble. Incidentally, two-year olds think sanitation workers are the coolest people on the planet. Out of the mouths of babes! I could go on but I’m afraid I might put my foot in it, and this sermon is long enough already. You all can do your own reflection on this point.

So let’s forge boldly on into the next function. “Our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.” I really struggled with this. Let’s just skip the question of what are the less respectable body parts. You all are clever; I’ll leave it up to your imaginations. But who are the people who are less respectable? Surely all of us have in one way or another been seen by society as not respectable, not decent. LGB folk, and particularly transgender folk. Insofar as our society has even acknowledged the existence of transgender folk, it has been as freaks who show up on daytime talk shows. Or

being kinky and weird, the subject of porn. In other words, our society has said, “It’s okay to be transgender if you play the role of the freak or the kink, available to be used, exploited, mocked by the ‘normal’ people, so long as you are willing to be disrespected in order to make ‘normal’ people feel more respectable.”

It’s a gross metaphor, but I think Paul is saying something vitally important here. Vital. That society deals with difference, accepts it, tolerates it, so long as difference is dishonored, disrespected, treated like a deviation and perversion. This plays out in a variety of ways, from gender expression and orientation, to physical ability, race, class, even religion. This goes all the way back to the Jews versus the gentiles, the people of God versus all those other people. The Ins and the Outs, the us and the them. Difference is tolerable only insofar as it is seen as deviant, dishonorable. And Paul says No. N.O. That cannot happen in the church. In the church, those who society sees as dishonorable, we clothe with greater honor. Those who society sees as less respectable, we treat with greater respect. Not just, “All are welcome,” but “All are worthy.” Not just tolerance, but the acknowledgment that we need each other. We need those who are transgender. We need those who are LGB. We need single unwed mothers. We need addicts. We need the unemployed. We need atheists. We even need straight married couples with children! Even breeders! In the church, we treat all with honor and respect, for all are welcome, and all are eminently worthy.

Not all Christians interpret it that way, but that’s how we interpret it in this church.