

“TO WHOM OUTCASTS HAVE BEEN ENTRUSTED”

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

After filming a movie in Asheville a few years ago, Kristen Wiig went on the David Letterman Show to promote her new film, and was asked what she thought of Asheville. In her sweet, unassuming way, she called us a little “hippie town, where people who used to follow the Grateful Dead have moved there to die.” Then again, she also said the restaurants were great, as well as the drum circle, and even admitted to meditating in some salt caves (no word on whether she did the goat yoga). Being an SNL junkie for nearly 30 years, I have loved Kristen Wiig since before she was “Kristen Wiig.” But, with apologies to her, I do have to conclude, in light of her description, she apparently did not spend an abundance of time in Asheville’s churches. And therein lies the challenge of the gospel today: to what extent should a church’s complexion match the complexion of the city to which it ministers?

In Ch. 56, the prophet Isaiah begins with the concept of justice. We’re called to “accomplish justice,” and do what is right, “for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.” Except the word for “deliverance” at the end of the verse is the same word translated “justice” in the first part of the verse. So, the first thing Isaiah does in the chapter is create an indivisible link between the justice we do and the revelation of God’s justice. When we “accomplish justice,” we participate in the very activity of God’s own work in the world.

But just how does Isaiah describe what this justice looks like? He doesn’t do it the way I might do it. Usually, when I think of justice, I think of its legal expressions. “Let justice be done”...yes, in the courts; in upholding the rights of oppressed people; in seeing to it that those who have been treated unfairly are once again treated fairly; in punishing the wicked and vindicating the righteous. That’s what I think of first when I hear the prophets say, “Make straight and smooth in the desert a highway for our God” (Is. 40:3), or, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!” (Amos 5:24). All of these things are part of the good, divine work of justice. No one who has the Holy Spirit in them can say otherwise.

But Isaiah doesn’t begin with this particular approach to justice. He begins with a demographic analysis of who’s included in the congregation at worship. And he concludes that there is an imbalance in the justice equation between God’s justice and the justice concerns of humankind. There are some who are being left out by the congregation, so God is concerned to emphasize that they belong, too. Who is being left out here? First, Isaiah says “the foreigner,” or literally, “the son of the foreigner.” The second Isaiah mentions is “the eunuch.”

It is interesting that the people could find justification for excluding both types of people in the Scriptures. Ezra, for example, issues an executive order, “So now, make confession to the LORD, God of your fathers, and do his will, and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women” (Ezr. 10:11). And Leviticus, as we know, is very careful to say that no one with a blemish could make an offering to the LORD. If you have acne, don’t bother.

People with blemishes can't go near the curtain, or approach the altar, so that they might not "profane my sanctuaries, for I am the LORD" (Lev. 21:23). If you want access to the altar, you're going to need some expensive moisturizers.

This is what makes Isaiah's prophecy so revolutionary. He is revealing just how much God loves these who have, up until now, been regarded as outcasts. Not that every Israelite thought these were bad people, necessarily. But they were certainly "unclean," at best. But God says, "I will give [these foreigners and eunuchs], in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." God will even make them "joyful in my house of prayer," and their gifts will be accepted at my altar. And "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples!"

I remember in my first Congregation; a woman came to the church. She was asking for aid to pay some bills. As was my custom, I sat down with her, and asked her for her story. I found out that she was a neighbor of mine, that she didn't go to church, and that she might like to come to church. And as I heard her story, I was moved by her account of God's mercy in her life, and the way she saw God acting on her, and the way she discerned the Holy Spirit's presence in the world. I said, "You know, I really wish you would come join us, this Sunday." And she said, "Oh, no, no, I couldn't do that." I said, "Why not?" She said, "You all dress so nicely," and I said, "Wow. Have you seen the chair of our finance committee on Sunday mornings? Wearing overalls? Our dress code is rather plain. Please come."

She never came. And I didn't learn my lesson. Very recently, I helped edit the "frequently asked questions" about our church, so that we could send them out in *Highlights*, and send them to those who have been interested in our church. And there's a question in the frequently asked questions list that says, "What is the dress code at your church," and I, thick-headed as I am; and having forgotten my previous experience with my aforementioned friend, wrote the answer as, "Casual to more traditional."

Well, that seems to me, in retrospect, to cut out half of Asheville. Our neighbors wear all manner of attire that's doesn't fit in the category of "casual to more traditional." Homemade clothes, tattoos, piercings, pink hair. We might have more neon hair here, with a more just dress code. I should have said, we go by the Garden of Eden tradition: since the Fall, we all wear something.

I hope you're familiar with Satirical news organization, *The Onion*. *The Onion* has a store on their website. There's a coffee mug they sell that says, *Stereotypes are a real time-saver*. What else do stereotypes do? Insulate us from the opportunities to experience the joy of God, not only in our church, but all throughout our city.

Does Jesus stereotype the Syrophenician woman? A Gentile not to be included in God's salvation history. She has a daughter with a demon, and she's desperate. She addresses Jesus, "Please, come heal my daughter," she begs.

Jesus doesn't even acknowledge her presence. And the disciples began to complain, "Jesus, send her away. She's annoying us. She won't be quiet." She comes again and begs, and Jesus

says this. “It’s not good to take children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Why did Jesus have to say that? After these last few weeks, the last thing we need is a mean Jesus. Is Jesus being a bigot? I just don’t know how to answer that question to be frank with you.

The best I can say is this, is that we see in Jesus, in this moment, all of Israel’s struggle, and all of the church’s struggle, to discern the boundaries of God’s love, as they wonder if that love might be for anyone besides them.

And the step from one place to another, the step from loving our own to loving those who’ve been excluded, is a risky, giant, step. Who belongs? Who’s included? Can those who’ve previously been excluded now be included? Jesus decides, finally, *yes*. Jesus says, “Yes” to those who’d always been excluded.

We have such a grand opportunity to open wide our doors to this counter-cultural city, to put the stereo-types aside, and to recognize each human being, every neighbor we come across, not only as a child of God, but potentially someone God would really love to send our way, so that we can shower them with the love that our community has come to expect from us.

The picture we see today from Isaiah is that God has prepared all kinds of wonderful, wacky, alternative, counter-cultural people, just outside our doors, and would love to send them our way. I believe we would love to receive them. The good news is, this is God’s hope and God’s delight. Such an ever-expanding welcome would be God’s joy, and it would be ours. It would be God’s justice, rolling down like waters, and God’s righteousness, like an ever-flowing stream.