

“How Big Can We Make Our Table?”
August 16, 2026
Scripture: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28

How do we determine who belongs in a community or a nation? Recently that’s become a matter of debate in our country. A vocal minority has begun talking a lot about “Heritage” Americans as opposed to immigrant Americans. Their claim is that true Americans should be limited to those folks who can trace their roots back to the original white European and Christian founders for whom, in their view, the country was created. That sounds like a sort of fringy belief, but lately it’s been advanced by people at the highest levels of our government. It’s become a sort of secular version of Christian nationalism that wants to create a sort of fusion of a particular form of Christianity with American civic life.

One of the outcomes of this view of citizenship is the assumption that white Christians of European ancestry should receive a privileged position in society. In other words, it’s not enough for a citizen simply to agree with our country’s ideals as stated in the Declaration of Independence to receive full benefits of citizenship. They also must hold a certain attachment to the land and to the bloodlines of our founders. Another term for that claim is “blood and soil.” If a person cannot demonstrate their connection to this ethnic heritage, then maybe they shouldn’t be considered a “real” American.

That’s not a new concept in our country. There have been whole political parties dedicated to it. It was a view that Abraham Lincoln argued against when he ran for the Senate in 1858. In a speech delivered in Chicago during that campaign he said:

“We have ... among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men [of the Founding era], If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’ and then they feel that ... it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.”

That’s a long quote, but it’s a great illustration of just how far back this issue really goes in our country. What we’re seeing now is not new. It happens whenever we’ve been faced with the prospect of a shift in our demographics. And we can expect to hear it more and more as we become a “majority minority” population where non-Hispanic whites make up less than 50%.

I share all that with you because, as I read this passage from Isaiah it seems to me that Israel, on its return from exile, is experiencing the same kind of debate. One of the steps taken to re-establish the nation after decades of exile and occupation was to purify the population and rid it of foreign elements that had become residents while the leadership class was in exile. In addition to the physical rebuilding of the temple and the city, the returning leaders wanted to

reconstitute the nation along racial-ethnic lines. Families were broken up, people were expelled. The author of this section of Isaiah offers a rebuke of those practices and redefines what it means to belong as a citizen of Israel.

We're told, "and the foreigners who join 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, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—those I will bring to my holy mountain." God will not reject those whom Israel rejects. God welcomes anyone willing to keep Torah, anyone who identifies with the foundational principles of their faith. It doesn't matter where they're from or what their heritage might be. God sees past all that and embraces them.

And you may have noticed there's a little gap in the reading this morning. I'm not sure why the lectionary does that, but it's a shame it has. The passage that's missing identifies another category of the population: eunuchs. Verse 4 reads, "For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, 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." That's a remarkable claim. In a society that is often preoccupied with purity and social boundaries, eunuchs represented an intolerable violation of sexual identity. Deuteronomy 23, verse 1 states clearly that no one in the condition of a eunuch may be admitted into the assembly of the Lord. Yet here we find God speaking through Isaiah overturning that prohibition and welcoming those whose sexual identity is ambiguous.

No one is left out of the circle of God's love because of who they are or where they're from. Anyone willing to love God by following Torah is loved by God and welcome at God's table.

That value, that radical welcome, is often hard to sustain in the life of a community. It's possible after decades and centuries of struggle and setbacks, a people can fall back into habits that exclude or reject those who are different or are seen as a problem. In the world where Jesus lived those people lived mostly in regions designated for gentiles or "Canaanites." There was no place called Canaan anymore, of course, that term for the woman who approaches Jesus in our story is probably used as an insult and not really an identification.

We can infer that because when she pleads on behalf of her daughter to Jesus, he's comfortable ignoring her. And when she becomes more insistent, his disciples are comfortable encouraging him to shut her up. When he tells her, "I'm not here for you," and she proceeds to beg for her daughter's healing, Jesus says something that sounds awfully harsh: "We don't give food meant for children to dogs." That should have been the end of it. Instead, she sort of gives it back to him. And we can almost see the light (not a lightbulb, I guess, but maybe a lantern) go on over his head. Maybe he is here for her after all.

God's promise to welcome the foreigner, to welcome all who are rejected, is revealed to Jesus through this woman's persistence, through her faith in the promise of healing Jesus embodies. And he is delighted to accommodate her. He doesn't begrudge her this, he doesn't

resent having to share something he thought was only for a chosen few. He gives her what she needs and rejoices in her faith. This is a watershed moment in Jesus' life as much as it is in hers.

And I think it stands as a model for the church. We can become preoccupied with purity and boundaries ourselves at times. I remember hearing from guest speaker, the Rev. Carol Howard Merritt, at a Presbytery Day event we held here years ago that churches too often expect folks to be fully established and settled before welcoming them in the life of the congregation. We aren't always very open to folks who are still figuring it out, still trying to build a career or a family. We prefer people who are fully formed, even though we're filled with people whose lives take unexpected detours all the time. One of the challenges we face, in light of Isaiah and of Jesus' encounter with this woman, is figuring out how big we can make our table.

As I read the Bible, whether it's the prophets or the gospels or letters, one theme that jumps out at me over and over is the desire for an ever-expanding welcome. People we assume are left out are constantly being included. Jesus' ministry is marked especially by this radical inclusion that makes the religious-types around him feel threatened or offended. And when we expand our table of welcome, we might offend or threaten some in our community who think certain folks don't belong. But that's our calling. It is our calling and our privilege to open our arms wide, to make our table bigger and bigger so more and more can be included in God's embrace and discover the love and compassion we have received.

It's not about belief or heritage or gender identity or background; it's all about love. We make our table bigger so we can share God's love wider and broader and deeper. And when we do that we realize God is present in every, single one of us. And no one, no one, is left out. "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel (and the world), 'I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.'" Praise be to God who welcomes us all!

Amen