

Isaiah 56:1-8

God Gathers the Outcasts

Toward the end of September the Niagara-region grape growers and wineries really kick things into high gear. 13,600 acres of vineyards are heavy with over 46 varieties of grapes. The sugar and acid in the grapes have reached their ideal levels and now it's time for the harvest. This is one of the busiest times for the vineyards as they gather in their crop, and for the wineries as they welcome tourists and tasters from all over. Tourists and wine enthusiasts flock to the region for tours and wine tasting and Canada's largest wine festival. I think people are naturally drawn to these kinds of events of harvest and abundance, and especially in the case of wine people participate in the festivities to various degrees. Many people gather, but some will be participants, and some will be more like spectators. Some people will go for a really immersive experience – they'll want to take off their shoes and stomp a barrel of grapes – like the way they used to make wine in the old days – or have extended conversations with the local sommeliers. Others will be more like spectators. There will be the designated drivers, or there will be people who get dragged along by a friend even though they don't like wine. They might eat the food but only sip on sparkling water or something.

As we enter the world of Isaiah 56 we are looking out on a ripe vineyard. The beginning of Isaiah describes a time for Israel when they would be like a dried up, neglected, and dying vineyard when God would send them into exile. Then just before the passage we read, in Isaiah 55, God promised a time when the rains would return, when God would tend the vineyard and it would grow to be something beautiful again. God says that the growth – the splendor of the

vineyard that is God's covenant people – will be so attractive that nations they do not know will come running to them, wanting to experience that same splendor. Now here we are in Isaiah 56 and that is exactly what is happening. Others have seen the goodness of the vineyard and they want “in.” They heard about the grapes and the wine and the food, they have heard about God's goodness and they are showing up to participate. The problem is that, despite their desire to participate in the religious life of Israel, some people have been sidelined to the role of spectator. There are two groups that this text talks about, and both have been excluded from full participation: the foreigners and the eunuchs.

A foreigner was a non-Israelite person who came into temporary contact with God's people – a foreigner would be that businessperson from Egypt coming to trade grain for olive oil and wine. Or it could be a traveler moving in caravans along the major roads that went north and south through the land of ancient Israel, connecting empires on either side. Or a foreigner could even be a military invader.¹ These so-called foreigners would know about what the God of Israel had done for them and want to worship this God, too. But they were restricted. According to Exodus 12 none of these foreign people were allowed to participate in the feast of Passover, according to Leviticus 22 they were not allowed to offer animals to sacrifice to God, and according to Ezekiel 44 they were not allowed to enter the temple. You can understand why foreigners might say, as in Isaiah 56:3 “The Lord will surely exclude me from his people!” This is not just in their imagination that they were being excluded – this was the reality.

The other group of people that were sidelined to the role of spectator were the eunuchs. Eunuchs were also foreigners – but theirs was a more specific

¹ Allen C. Myers, [The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 390.

struggle. Eunuchs were castrated males who were often given high governmental positions or sensitive political positions in the nations around Israel. It was not uncommon for men to agree to become a eunuch in order to advance their political career, or often times slaves would be forced to become eunuchs. The thought was that they would be more trustworthy in sensitive positions because they would not pose a threat to the king and his progeny. Now, if you aren't quite understanding what I'm saying this is really the main point: being a eunuch meant that these people would never have kids or a big family of their own. And in the ancient times someone's long term safety, wealth, and honor had a lot to do with having a big family and lots of kids. That's how someone could make their name last forever – by passing it on to their children, kind of like how we pass on last names to children and grandchildren. Eunuchs gave that up, they weren't producing a family, so we can understand why they might have said something like, "I am only a dry tree." And then to add salt to the wound they were excluded from full participation in the religious life of Israel. Deuteronomy 23 says, "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord." Even if they wanted to observe the Sabbath and worship God, they were not allowed to do it in the same way as the Israelites. It makes sense that eunuchs would not be feeling very welcome or included, despite their desire to be a part of God's people and to honor the Sabbath. Both foreigners and eunuchs showed up to the ripe vineyard of God's restored people, but instead of participating in the celebration of harvest they were sidelined to the role of spectators.

There is no doubt that many people today still feel like they show up to the goodness of God's vineyard with a desire to participate in the life of God's people, only to be sidelined to the roles of spectators, or worse. Our situation is not

exactly the same as the ancient Israelites after their exile, but we ought to still ask, “Where do we hear the echoes of the foreigners and eunuchs?” The foreigners might be anyone who shows up to church or even our broader community who doesn’t share the same cultural background of the majority of the people in the room. This is kind of ironic since in the terms of Is. 56, actually most of us (maybe all of us?) would be considered foreigners since we’re not Jewish. We’ve been welcomed into God’s family as foreigners, and yet we find ways to keep others out. I often listen to a podcast called *Pass the Mic* - it’s put on by a couple of Black Reformed Christians. They recently shared the story of a Black woman from Texas who was hired by a church as a worship leader, but within a few days of publicly speaking out against racial injustice she was fired from her church position without explanation. The cultural expectations of her church became clear: we don’t talk about that stuff here. She was moved from participant and leader to outsider – a cultural foreigner. Or I just learned this week that in the Christian Reformed Church there is a whole history of discussion – from about 1908-1982 – on whether or not adopted children could be baptized, or when precisely they could be baptized. For some time, the CRC did not baptize adopted babies because they were not sure that their birth parents were saved. It hurts to even say that. These children – often children in transracial families – were sidelined in the CRC. We might understand if they echoed the words of the foreigner from Is 56, “The Lord will surely exclude me from his people!” This is not just in their imagination that they were being excluded – this was the reality and still is the reality for many who desire to be part of the church.

I also think we can hear echoes of the eunuchs’ concerns today in the voices of other kinds of people who do not have children of their own. One of my

very best friends, Bailey, remained single into her 30s and she was awesome at being single. She was usually very content to be on her own, and she would also pour herself into her friendships. She mentored college students, served in church youth groups, and came to my house to hold my babies and love on my kids when I was too tired or grumpy to think straight. So I asked her recently if there was any story or text or person in scripture that has been used in a way to affirm or support her identity as a single person? Bailey said, “Not really, the Bible has mostly just been used to tell me I am incomplete.” For all the church’s emphasis on Paul the New Testament letter writer and theologian extraordinaire we may forget that he was content to remain single. Couples who do not have children may feel the same way, like they are incomplete – even like they cannot fully participate in the life of the church. So much of what churches do is geared toward families and parents of children – from our programming to our assumptions about what a mature and responsible Christ-follower looks like – traditional ideas about families are central. Of course, caring for families is not a bad thing. We should do everything we can to love children and support parents and caretakers – yes, absolutely! But we would do well to also be aware of how that emphasis on families ends up making spectators out of people who do not have children or those who do not fit our idea of a traditional family. There is no doubt that many people today still feel like they show up to participate in the life of God’s people, only to be sidelined to the roles of spectators while the rest of us enjoy the fruit of the harvest of God’s ripe vineyard.

In Isaiah 56, God tells the Israelites, it’s not going to be like that anymore. “The Sovereign Lord declares—he who gathers the exiles of Israel: ‘I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered’” (Is. 56:8). That includes the

outsiders and the childless who have come to vineyard. The vineyard is open and the harvest is ripe. So the boundary lines for who is allowed to fully participate in the life of God's people are no longer just about the national identity of being a Hebrew – now it's about the people who maintain justice and do what is right; it's about the people who keep the Sabbath day – in other words, God honors and accepts those people who show up to the religious life of Israel ready to participate.

For the foreigners, God makes his house a house of prayer for *all nations*. Foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD and who show up to the ripe vineyard to participate in God's covenant will be welcomed in. In a kind of reversal of Leviticus 22 and Ezekiel 44, God *would* now accept their sacrifices and God *would* allow them to enter his house. The vineyard is open and the harvest is ripe.

For the eunuchs who come to God's ripe vineyard, God promises them something even better than sons and daughters. Imagine a patriarch like Jacob who had so 12 sons, sitting in a rocking chair and looking at a gallery wall of family pictures and family memories – each son's family wearing a different color shirt – was my family the only ones who did that? He didn't really have a gallery wall, but you get the idea. It's a way of memorializing one's family and legacy. God would give the eunuch something even better: a memorial in the temple, a place of belonging in the gallery wall of God's family. And the eunuch would not be able to pass their name on to their children, but God promises them an everlasting name – like God bestows on them *his own* family name. God gathers the eunuchs who come to the vineyard to be part of God's family. They are no longer spectators; they are part of the family celebration.

In Acts 8, after Jesus had died and risen and ascended to heaven, one of Jesus' disciples, Philip, comes across a man sitting in a chariot reading the book of Isaiah – the same book we read from this morning. He had just come from Jerusalem where he was worshiping the God of Israel. This man was an important official, he was in charge of the finances of the queen of Ethiopia. And like many people in sensitive government roles, he was a eunuch. He was a foreigner and a eunuch. And as Philip approaches him it becomes clear that he maybe needs some help understanding the book of Isaiah. “Do you understand what you’re reading?” Philip asked. “How can I unless someone explains it to me?” Philip helps him to see how the prophet Isaiah was prophesying about the good news of Jesus Christ. Acts 8 tells us that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53 when Philip started helping him understand the message. I don’t think it’s too far a stretch to imagine they made it to chapter 56. God gathered this Ethiopian eunuch into God’s family – welcoming him to the riches of the harvest through the sacrifice of Christ. The eunuch asked, “What can stand in the way of my baptism?” Well in light of Is 56, the answer surely had to be: nothing. Philip baptized him that day. His picture was put on God’s gallery wall and he was given an everlasting name. The vineyard is open, and the harvest is ripe.

God is gathering in all kinds of people and making us all participants in God’s abundant harvest celebration. So for anyone watching or listening this morning who has ever felt like you have been made to be a spectator instead of a participant in the family of God, God is gathering you in this morning. To those who feel like cultural outsiders in this church tradition, in Christ God honors you and *your* expressions of worship. God honors the sacrifices you make and the concerns you bring into this church family. And to those who feel like an outsider

because your own family isn't made up of a mom and a dad and 2.5 kids, God is giving you a place on the gallery wall – a permanent memorial that testifies: you belong here, your contribution to this church family matters, and your name will not be forgotten.

At one time we were all outsiders, whether or not we realize it. In the terms of Isaiah 56 most, if not all of us, would be considered foreigners – because most, if not all of us, are Gentiles. None of us own the vineyard – we are, as the apostle Paul says, those who have been grafted in (Rom. 11:17). That is to say, through Christ, we have been joined to God's people; we are all the recipients of God's gracious invitation to gather and take in the fruit of the harvest. So let none of us say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." Rather, having been gathered in we get to share that blessing – so when people show up to the vineyard of God's people restored through Jesus Christ, instead of sidelining them to the role of spectators we have the joy of welcoming them to participate in the harvest celebration. The vineyard is open, and the harvest is ripe. Thanks be to God.

Gracious God, thank you for this the gift of your Word. Help us to receive what we have heard and to live in ways that reflect your generous welcoming to all who long to be part of your family. Help us to find ways to welcome people into this church family during this time of physical distancing. God gather people to yourself for the sake of your mission in the world and the glory of your name. Amen.