

Great Gathering

August 16, 2026

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Matthew 15:21-28

Who's in? Who's out? Who's us? Who's them? Who gets the benefit of the doubt? Who gets doubted without benefits?

These are not new questions in the United States, as you well know. The history of Americans' opinions of people from different national and ethnic backgrounds has some real ugliness in it, and some real bright points. We live far more companionably with people of different sexual orientations than I ever expected – I never thought I'd see legal marriage for LGBTQ relationships, and for now, at least, they're both legal and generally accepted in many places.

It was once illegal for people of different races to marry in some US states; those prohibitions have crumbled. American immigration law is, I'm sorry to say, a horror show from its origins with the Chinese Exclusion Act, relentlessly racist and, in these days, enforced with cruelty that's been encouraged at the highest level.

These questions are older than the Hawaiian Kingdom or the United States or any government of the world. The Book of Ezra describes the rebuilding of Jerusalem when the Persian Empire permitted Jewish exiles to return around five hundred years before Jesus' birth. The exile lasted around seventy years – nearly three generations – so the people had learned to think of at least some of those around them as neighbors. As the children grew into young adults, they began to marry among these neighbors, even though intermarriage was discouraged. Ezra, a priest, announced that the non-Jewish wives would have to go back to their families' homes in Persia.

If you want to read something heartbreaking, read the tenth chapter of Ezra. It not only says that those families were broken up. It lists them. By name.

Curiously enough, at near the same time another prophet took up the pen. His work ended up as part of the Book of Isaiah, which is a composite work of at least three different authors writing at different times, and also includes a few chapters of Second Kings. Chapter 56 is considered by scholars as the place where this post-exile writing starts. And how did this writer begin?

Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come
and my deliverance be revealed.

2 Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.
3 Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely separate me from his people,”
and do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”
4 For thus says the Lord:
To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
5 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.
6 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—
7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;

I read there some sections our lectionary editors omitted. The Torah did place limits on who could enter the religious assembly – a worship service, basically – which included men with injuries to their genitals. I really don’t understand why that should be relevant to anything, but then I don’t understand why a lot of things were considered relevant. Leviticus 21 bans someone who is blind from serving in religious leadership. Well, I’m rather pleased that we’ve discerned that that wasn’t a meaningful issue, given that my daughter Rebekah is blind and was ordained as UCC minister this year.

Human history around disability isn’t that good.

As Samuel Giere writes at Working Preacher, “Isaiah 56-66 returns to a basic question: With the diagnosis and the renewed promise both in view, what now? The first movement in this ‘what now?’ is Isaiah 56.1-8. It addresses the reality that God’s blessing spills over the boundaries assumed by God’s people — the insiders.”

At much the same time Ezra was breaking up families – which was not, in fact, required by the Law of the Torah – someone we’ll call Isaiah spoke another vision. He proclaimed God’s welcome not just in the city, not just in the community, but in the place of worship. He proclaimed God’s welcome not just for those foreigners who hadn’t been banned in the Law, he

proclaimed it for eunuchs who had been banned in the Law. Isaiah envisioned a realm of God that was greater than the precincts of a Temple, that was wider than the walls of a city, that was more extensive than the boundaries of a nation.

Let it be a great gathering.

The great gathering did have qualifications. “Maintain justice, and do what is right.” This had been the refrain of Israel’s prophets for generations. As Joel B. Kemp writes at Working Preacher, “For the writers of Isaiah 56, admission into God’s community is contingent upon a few ethical (rather than ethnic) requirements.”

Here I invite you to a choice. The Bible was written by many people over hundreds, even over a thousand years. They didn’t believe the same things about the world as we do, and they didn’t believe the same things about the world as each other. They didn’t believe the same things about God as one another. As we’ve heard today from Ezra and from Isaiah, they could and did believe radically opposite things about what God considered right and good and proper at the very same time.

So we have a choice.

We can go with Ezra. We can choose an ethnic group or national heritage and hold that as the highest allegiance and the source of what is good and right. We can be Swedish or Norwegian or English (to start with my own background) or Japanese or Hawaiian or Chinese or Okinawan or American (whatever that means) or Micronesian or one of a host of identities. We can say, “I’m in, you’re out, and there’s nothing you can do about it as long as we hold the power to keep you outside.”

Ezra 10 says we can do that.

We can also choose to form a community made up of people of many ethnicities, many heritages, many backgrounds. We can choose to form a community made up of people we’d previously chosen to ignore or dismiss, like those with disabilities or like those with a sexuality different from our own. We can choose that, knowing that it’s the more difficult way. It requires discussion and debate and discernment about what is good, and right, and fit.

Isaiah 56 says we can do that.

Which will we choose?

So what did Jesus do?

He did... both. Which is awkward.

He refused to aid this Canaanite woman's request to heal her daughter, and he did it with an insult that wounds us even in translation. He called her and her daughter dogs, and that was exactly as insulting as it sounds. And then, she turned the insult back on itself brilliantly: even the dogs eat the crumbs from the children's table.

Jesus told her that his community would be Ezra's community. Her reply reflected Isaiah's community. She seems to have changed his mind. Suddenly the blessings he was bringing could be shared with those outside of Israel. Suddenly a new world had opened.

Expanding into that world became one of the most noteworthy features of the new Christian Church following his death and resurrection. New life for Jesus became new life for Jews and new life for Gentiles as well. Apostles like Philip and Paul began working with Gentiles to create new Christian communities around the Mediterranean. The foreigners were warmly invited into the Way of Jesus.

As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Right now, we are living through times so fraught and so tenuous, everything depends on exactly how good the Good News really is. It's not good enough if it's good just for me, or for the people who look and think like me, or for the people I already happen to like and love. Is it Good News yet for those dying of Covid? Is it Good News yet for the starving and the incarcerated and the unemployed and the homeless? Is it Good News yet for the people across the border? Is it Good News yet for the people you've been conditioned all your life to ignore?"

"If the answer is no, then we have work to do. Remember, Jesus himself has gone ahead of us, widening the gates and throwing open the doors to welcome the voice of a despised foreigner."

So there's your options. A community which accepts some and denies many, or a community that welcomes as many as we can.

You can have either one and claim the Bible justifies it. It does.

I know which one I'd rather live in. Give me Isaiah, not Ezra. Give me Jesus – at least after he'd heard the wisdom of the Canaanite woman.

I'd like the Great Gathering, please.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson