

Respect

Isaiah 56: 1-8

We are continuing with our conversation around the practice of Sabbath Keeping and our word for today is “Respect”. As this week continued to unfold, I could not help but think God had laid this specific word upon our hearts for a time such as this. Last Sunday, while we were still at worship, details were still coming out about the night club shooting in Orlando. It was only later did we learn that 49 people were killed and several people were wounded...all because they were “others”: men and women whose sexual orientation made them targets for hate. And then, after this horrible tragedy, I was reminded that this past Friday was the one-year anniversary of the Charleston massacre where nine people were killed and several people were wounded...all because they were “others”: African-American men and women whose skin color made them targets for hate.

As this week continued to unfold, I could not help but believe God had laid this word, “Respect” upon our hearts for a time such as this. This word “Respect” becomes a glaring reminder of the tendency of our wider culture to “otherize” whole segments of our community based on skin color, based on religion, based on sexual orientation...all the while making these supposed “others” targets for hate.

Unfortunately, “we have seen the appalling and frightening depths of hate that human beings can descend to with their words and actions. Far beyond disagreements, debate and opposition to one another’s ideas or beliefs, hate [has turned into] vicious attacks, verbal abuse, and physical violence against other human beings.”

Ultimately, hate has become the way we otherize people and in doing so, we feel like we have been given permission to deny them the very image of God found in all of God’s children. A theology and practice that goes against the very character and nature of our God.

Which leads me to our text today....

I want to draw everyone’s attention to the one who is speaking these words in Isaiah. It is not the prophet speaking here. It is our God, the God of love, the God of grace, the God who welcomes supposed outsiders and embraces all as Beloved children of God.

For us to understand the significance of this text, especially in light of our word “Respect”, especially in light of our culture’s tendency to otherize people, we need to know a little background about this text.

As you may remember, one of the largest storylines in the Book of Isaiah is the people’s experience in Exile. The people of Israel were conquered and the

majority of the people were taken into Exile. Notice I didn't say all the people. A remnant of people remained behind and tried to figure out what it meant to be faithful people of God in this new uncertain circumstance.

Now, in the verses right before our text, the people of Israel who were in exile, have started to return. They started to come home and with them came "other" people, other people who looked different, other people who acted different, other people who didn't quite fit the image of what a faithful person of God should be yet still had heard the word of God, the word of God's love, the word of God's grace and their lives had been transformed.

The people had started to return from Exile and brought along with them "other" people, people who had different ideas, people who looked different, people who acted different. The people started to return and brought back "other" people, expecting these "others" to be welcomed into the community of faith.

All of this "otherness" became the perfect breeding ground for fear for the community who had stayed, and tried to figure out what it meant to be faithful in this uncertain time.

So there were arguments about who was in and who was out. There were comments made about these "others" and how they would never ever be accepted

into the house of God. They were too different. They didn't belong. They weren't even trying to learn the culture so that they could fit in.

So many hateful and negative comments. All of which of course created more fear. It was almost as if everyone, or at least anyone who believed they knew exactly what God was going to say on the whole situation had permission to say and do whatever they wanted against this supposed outsiders and it would be okay, because of course, God would approve of their actions. It was almost as if these supposed insiders had permission to make these "others" targets for their hate and fear...

Well, That is until God speaks. And surprise, surprise here is what God says: "Make sure no outsider, no supposed "other" who now follows God ever has the occasion to say 'God put me in second class'. To the outsider, to the supposed "other", to those who have been told you don't belong... You belong to me. You now follow me, living for me, working for me, to all those who want to be my partners in Creation, to all those who keep the Sabbath and hold fast to my covenant, you belong to me. I will bring you to my holy mountain and give you joy in my house of prayer.

God goes on to say: “I will welcome the supposed “other” just the same as the “insider”. Oh, yes, my house of worship will be known as a house of prayer for all people.”

I’m going to let that one sink in for a bit... “My house of worship will be known as a house of prayer for all people.”

Now this is where the supposed insiders began to object. I imagine the conversation went something like this: “God, you know you said, right here in this Law you gave us, that foreigners and outsiders were not welcome. They were not to be included in the house of the Lord. All these ones who are different from us would not be accepted. So you see, We were just trying to do what you said God. Back us up here.”

To which I imagine God’s reply was something like, “Really, Really...if you were so concerned about what I said in the Law that I gave you, then you would have loved me above all the other Gods, you would have taken care of the Widows and orphans in your midst, you would have made justice, loved kindness, and extended grace to the stranger in your midst....But you didn’t do that. No, You only wanted to pick and choose the Scriptures that worked best for you. You seem to have forgotten about that whole right relationship with me, that whole right relationship with all my children that is behind the Law. You seem to have

forgotten that once you were strangers in a foreign land and I welcomed you. I embraced you as my own.

In that moment, as soon as God speaks, God shows the people that God is doing a new thing. God shows them that God will continue to work in our world to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation. God will continue to do a new thing for the people of God. God did not just create the world and then leave. Time and time again, God has remained faithful to God's promises toward the people of God every frustrating, every life-giving, every life-transforming minute of the way. God is still continuing to work in our world to bring the fulfilled Kingdom of God here so that our world is a place where all are welcomed, where all are named and claimed as God's own, where all are transformed and become the people God created them and calls them to be just like God is doing for us here and now.

In fact, when the people wanted to say to the supposed outsiders, to the supposed "others" you don't belong because you don't fit a, b, or c, God says, "Umm no."

Then God goes one step farther and says to all the people, the insiders and the supposed outsiders, to the ones that stayed and the ones that returned, God says to all the children of God, If you want to be in right relationship with me and with

all of my children, all I am asking from you is that you make justice, do what is right and ...Keep the Sabbath.

Now I fully admit this last one about Keeping the Sabbath doesn't exactly fit the other two. The other two have to do with social justice and creating a better place for all people. So how does this Keeping the Sabbath, this taking a day of rest, fit into this picture?

Well, here is what we forget. If we go back to the 10 commandments in Exodus or Deuteronomy, it says: "No working on the Sabbath; keep it holy just as GOD, your God, commanded you. Work six days, doing everything you have to do, but the seventh day is a Sabbath, a Rest Day—no work: not you, your son, your daughter, your servant, your maid, your ox, your donkey (or any of your animals), and not even the foreigner visiting your town. That way your servants and maids will get the same rest as you. Don't ever forget that you were slaves in Egypt and GOD, your God, got you out of there in a powerful show of strength. That's why GOD, your God, commands you to observe the day of Sabbath rest.

You see, in the very practice that distinguishes the people of God, God doesn't make any exceptions. From the insiders down to the supposed outsiders, including the foreigner visiting your town, everyone is called to keep the Sabbath. No one, no one is forgotten. In the practice that is one of the core identity pieces

for the people of God, everyone is invited to participate. There are no qualifications. There are no membership tests. There are separations or divisions. All are called to Keep the Sabbath.

By inviting all to keep the Sabbath, God is showing the world that God's children, that God's creation does not belong to the world but rather we as the children of God belong to God. All are made in the image of God. All are named and claimed by God. All are welcomed, no ifs ands or buts.

So think about it. If this idea of Keeping the Sabbath is what is being required for membership in the community of God, then it shatters the notion of what it means to be qualified to be a person of God. Because anyone can keep the Sabbath. Anyone can enter the place where the Spirit of God dwells in and among the people of God. Anyone can take a step back and say, "I belong to the God who formed heaven and earth and then formed my inmost being."

Or let me say it another way---God is the one who gets to decide who is and who is not worthy of God's grace, God's love, and God's mercy and guess what God isn't asking our opinion on the matter. Everyone is worthy. Everyone is loved. Everyone is named and claimed as a Beloved Children of God.

As this week continued to unfold, I couldn't help but believe that God had laid this word Respect on our hearts for a time such as this because it is only by

living in community together, a community that is marked by love, peace, justice and respect, that the world will know that there is another way, a way not of hate but acceptance, a way not of fear but of light and hope, a way not of “otherizing” people, but a way of seeing the image of God in each and every one of God’s children.

This world needs more examples of respect...like the ones shown to the community in Orlando. This past week, the Orlando Shakespeare Theater has joined efforts to keep protesters from Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church from disrupting the funerals of those killed at gay nightclub Pulse. For the past two days, staff and others have used the theater's costume shop to build 11 sets of "angel wings."

"Volunteers will be wearing these large, white angel wings to show their support, proclaim love, and block the view of mourners from potential protesters," said artistic director Jim Helsinger.

It is almost as if they are saying, “ I will welcome the supposed “other” just the same as the “insider”. Oh, yes, my house of worship will be known as a house of prayer for all people.”

May it be so. Amen.

