

God Gathers Us to Worship

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A popular movie series from a few years back depicted society divided into five major factions. Everyone was assigned a specific role for life. Stepping outside these assigned roles was not permitted or safe. In fact, it was very dangerous to be a divergent and not fit in where you were supposed to. The movie series had a keen observation of our human tendencies. They showed each faction at odds with the others. Isn't that the nature of all people? We tend to be quick to identify which group we belong to and to shun or spurn those who do not. And this type of rejection and division can really hurt us. Who likes to be told that they don't belong to a group? And there's more than just class discrimination. Racism is also a cause for division. Need we even begin discussing how it has caused pain? Many are made to stand on the fringe and denied privilege or access to step beyond their circle. What about the group which worships the Lord? Sometimes a person might yearn to belong with those who worship the Lord but feel like they are stuck on the outside. How does God respond? We find the answer today in Isaiah chapter 56. God gathers us to worship, by his righteousness and grace, and to spread his word to every place.

God did set up divisions in ancient Israel. He portioned out specific roles to groups. That is clearly seen his stipulation that only men from the tribe of Levi were to serve him as priest. And even then, only those who were properly appointed should be offering up sacrifices. In addition, only a chosen few were allowed inner access to the temple itself and even then, only on the appointed times. God further impressed this on the people when he made stipulations regarding foreign born people and those who were eunuchs. So they had the levels of access encircling the center of their worship life. Levites were in the center, the non-Levites looked in from a further circle, and the foreign born and eunuchs looked in from further distance, and finally, of course, the unbelieving nations were even further separated from Israel.

God had a good reason for all this. He was teaching them about their relationship with him. He is holy. Sinful mankind can't expect to just approach him and have access to him. We are shut out of his presence because we deserve it. We stand outside his holiness and can only yearn to just be a gatekeeper for his temple. But God never intended this system of worship to mean certain groups didn't matter to him. He certainly didn't want the foreigner and the widow to be forgotten. In fact his laws for Israel emphasized a special concern for them which so many other ancient cultures did not. God cared for everyone -including the foreigners outside of Israel. Yet Israel arrogantly looked down on other groups. The tendency in Israel was, in fact, to turn their noses at those outside their circles. They saw themselves as God's chosen nation. Even if someone yearned to worship the true God, they weren't treated as true worshippers. It was hard for many in Israel to fathom that God had intended to give his grace to others. They assumed they would always be above others.

Imagine the shock when the prophecies we read here were shared. Isaiah and other prophets spoke of how the Lord wanted to give free salvation to all. He gave an open invitation for "anyone who thirsts" to drink up the water of life -his Word. And the prophecies recorded in Isaiah 55 of "my faithful covenant promised to David" were for more than David's kingdom and Israel. "Surely you will summon nations you know not," spoke the Lord. Then we read today in chapter 56, "My salvation is close at hand, my righteousness is soon to be revealed." God is going to bring his rescue! "Surely he means for us!" Israel might have reasoned. I doubt they would have anticipated Isaiah speaking of what he does next: *"To the eunuchs who ...hold fast to my covenant— to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. And foreigners ...who hold fast to my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar."* He doesn't just accept the outsiders; he richly blesses and welcomes them! He gives them access and privilege to his house of worship!

Permit me to bring us back to 1861 and the start of the civil war. You just have to greatly admire those who eagerly enlisted and bravely fought even though they were viewed by many as second-class citizens. At the start of the war, black men made up only 14 percent total male population of the United States. And only 1 percent of those men lived in the north. At first, they were not even allowed to enlist in the Union army. However, within the first year President Lincoln rectified that. They still were initially regarded by many of the Union army and navy officers as inferior in their standing and were not expected to help much. But the black regiments in the civil war quickly changed that attitude. A mere three months after enlistment began a unit from Kansas proved vital to the victory in a battle. Looking down the record of major battles you see that the segregated units of black soldiers played a crucial role in nearly every battle of the war. The soldiers immediately gained respect from their fellow soldiers and were recognized for their service.

It's even more foolish when anyone looks down on anyone else who yearns with repentance and faith to be part of God's house. It is in our human nature to limit God's kingdom to our comfort zone, isn't it? Racism may not be as prevalent as it was generations ago, but people are still judged on the basis of their skin or nationality. Could this ever happen in God's church? It has. Not just in Israel but in America too. Why were so many Americans fleeing the suburbs of larger cities when the population of the inner cities changed to different ethnic groups? Why were churches, including many WELS congregations, dying off in numbers even as their neighborhoods remained full of people needing the gospel? Did those churches reason, "We can't serve the people here. We're about historical Lutheranism. They wouldn't be interested in what we have to offer." Or did the attitude of a few individuals dominate so that when people of other backgrounds came

to the church they were never welcomed as “real” members? I don’t know. I wasn’t there and it’s not my job to judge that. But there are a lot of people who feel like they don’t belong in God’s house because they are left on the outside. And what about when someone becomes a part of our rich Lutheran heritage and join a congregation? It is easy for someone new to feel on the outside when those who have been members for 20, 40, or 80 years insist on being in charge of everything. The “new guys” are left labeled as the “new guys” feeling unimportant. And what about when a person on the fringe of society seeks with repentance and faith to worship in God’s house? Someone with an addiction struggle, who has struggled with the sin of same-sex attraction, who has no religious background, who is socially or intellectually impaired -- what happens when they desire to offer sacrifices of praise in God’s house? Are they richly and warmly welcomed or sort of welcomed? Are they made to feel they belong or made to feel like they don’t really belong because they are not part of the original tribe?

God says he not only welcomes them to his house but is very pleased with having them there! He says they will be filled with joy in serving him as their Savior God. I’m reminded of the black soldiers who enlisted in the civil war. Isn’t it funny that the Union accepted them to offer their lives, called them free men, and yet was surprised when they earned medals of honor on the battlefield? Don’t be surprised when those who many might regard as least valuable in God’s church prove to be the most dedicated in service to God! They find joy in serving the God who set them free!

The people of Israel had to learn that they were not in his kingdom because of their own efforts. They were in it because of God’s grace. It was grace alone that brought them to worship and allowed them to worship. Isaiah 53 described the workings of Jesus as the suffering servant. Though he was born of the line of David and the very Son of God, he lowered himself to be the very least. And though he was completely innocent and deserving of the glory of heaven, he bore the sins of all. Not just Israel. The sins of all the people. And his invitation to freely receive his righteousness through faith is given to all. Recall in the New Testament how Philip met a foreigner who was also a eunuch. His Bible scroll was open to just before this very section of Scripture. Don’t you think this reading fascinated him? “Do I really belong? Who is this Scripture talking about?” And beginning there Philip told him the good news about Jesus. Then that foreign man was baptized, and he received a name better than having his own sons and daughters. He was an eternal heir of the kingdom of God. God had gathered him through the gospel of Christ Jesus.

We could never break the barrier of division that stood between us and our God. But our God is a God who tears down such barriers. He removes the dividing wall between himself and his creation. He freely brings his salvation and his righteousness. It is striking to note that in the gospel of Mark, for example, Jesus is constantly rejected by the people of Israel and constantly held onto in faith by the outsiders. It is the foreigner, the outcast, the lame, the blind, the outsiders who see Jesus for who he really is. He is the Son of God come to bring rescue to the outcast. To the one who feels like they don’t deserve to be in God’s presence, longing and yearning for access, he comes. And Jesus by his death, causes not only the curtain of the temple to be torn, but the very division of sin it symbolized. Through the gift of his life we have righteousness. Through the payment of his redeeming death we have salvation. We belong to God and are invited into his house now and forever! There is no second-class. There’s only those gathered by the grace of God into his kingdom.

God said he would accept the sacrifices of the foreigner and the eunuch! They serve him in joy. So it is with you. The apostle reminds all believers, “in view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies and living sacrifices...this is your spiritual act of worship.... holy and pleasing to God in Christ Jesus.” Like the priest of Levi’s tribe lifting hands in prayer, we can all approach our God in the freedom of the forgiveness won by Christ. And every prayer, every act of praise, everyone is acceptable who comes through Christ. There are only those who by grace and through faith belong to God’s house.

And it’s not you and I who have built such a house. “These I will bring to my holy mountain...I will gather still others.” He gives us his righteousness and salvation. He gathers us. We are all gathered by our loving and gracious God. He brought you and me into his kingdom. He accepts your praise, mine, and the praise of others who once looked in from the outside of his church. He accepts it all as coming from those who trust in him, who love him, who know his great love in Christ.

What happened in those places of worship where everyone recognized this truth? Instead of shutting down in frustration they opened their hearts and doors. You might look at the intense persecution in Indonesia against Christians and wonder: “Is God’s Word for them?” Yes. So we send. And what about the culture of China, extremely diverse and often confusing to the western mind? God gathers there too. And he has used our synod in the gathering. Would you expect to find an open door in a land like India where Hinduism and false worship is so strong, or what about Vietnam? Our church is involved in a growing Seminaries in those places! What about places like Apache land where there was no knowledge of the Lord just a handful of generations back? Stick around later this morning. You’ll be filled with joy to hear how he has filled with joy those who offer praise there in the name of Jesus. These places all have their own Confessional Lutheran pastors –side by side with our missionaries in the task before them.

It is kind of funny to note that the south at General Lee’s urging enlisted some black soldiers. They were promised their freedom after the war if they enlisted. Only about 40 men actually enrolled. Fighting for their oppressors and earning freedom apparently wasn’t so appealing. Not as appeal as fighting when you were already declared and acknowledged as a freeman. We are free. We are gathered by his grace. We find joy serving and joy reaching out to others in every place. Let no one, however far off or different, stand looking in. God gathers us to worship.