

SERMON TITLE: "Dwelling in God's House of Prayer for All People"
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 56:1-8
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 30, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, I went with our United Methodist Women to visit the Youth Futures shelter. We learned that the Ogden shelter was the first in the state to accept unaccompanied youth who are homeless or runaways. Even now, Youth Futures is still the only facility in the state that provides safe and legal overnight accommodations for 12-17 year olds. The shelter is strategically located at 28th and Adams, just a half block from George Washington High School, and can house up to 14 teenagers at any given time.

Our Thursday afternoon visit to the shelter went along well with my Thursday morning inspirational reading from the comic strip *Zits*. If you follow that comic strip like I do, you know that it's about the life of a high-school-aged boy named Jeremy. In the series of strips that ended on Thursday, Jeremy's girlfriend Sara had twisted his arm into volunteering with her at a homeless shelter. Their job was to organize a Halloween party for the kids. In the first square of Thursday's comic strip, Sara was praising Jeremy for his great work in helping the kids select and assemble costumes from the hodgepodge that had been donated to the shelter. In the second square, Sara pointed to a happy girl with a big red hat, a pink tutu skirt, and a microphone. When Sara asked Jeremy what the girl was supposed to be, Jeremy replied, "A firefighting pop-singer with a splash of magical fairy." Sara thought that costume was quite original. But then the final frame of the comic strip showed Jeremy's best friend Pierce wearing an identical outfit.¹

Living in a homeless shelter would definitely be a challenge and might have the potential to make a person feel like a lonely outcast. But maybe in the best of times, a shelter is a place where good-hearted people give of their time and resources to help those who are struggling, so the poor can find

some little bits of dignity, joy, and creative expression. Maybe in the best of times, a shelter is a place where a homeless girl, a firefighter, a pop-singer, a magical fairy, a teenage boy with a nose ring, or a combination of all those could be accepted and welcome.

For a couple weeks now, we've been talking about dwelling in God's house. Two Sundays ago, we read the story of Jacob, whose nighttime encounter with the holy gave him the possibility of dwelling in God's house of dreams. Last Sunday, we read the story of King Hezekiah, who repaired the temple and made a priority of dwelling in God's house of worship. Today, I invite you to look at a third scripture on this theme. This passage comes from the prophet Isaiah, whose concern was dwelling in God's house of prayer for all people.

1—GOD'S HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ISRAEL

God's house of prayer that the prophet Isaiah imagined was, first of all, a place where his own people could pray. The northern kingdom of Israel had long ago been conquered by Assyria, and the people of the southern kingdom of Judah had been taken as captives to Babylon. But, by the time Isaiah chapter 56 was written, a number of generations had passed, and God was gathering up the outcasts. Some of the Hebrew descendants were returning home. King Cyrus and King Darius of Persia had given permission and material support, and the Jews were rebuilding Jerusalem and a second temple. No longer did they have to cry and sing songs of lamentation along the rivers of Babylon. Instead, they could joyfully call upon God in their own land. Finally, they could relax and trust in God to be their shelter, refuge, and fortress. Back in their own spiritual home, finally, they could let down their guard and be themselves. Once again, they could find happiness in keeping the Sabbath and obeying their Jewish laws and traditions.

Dwelling in God's house of prayer would be a great comfort for the Jewish people. If we listen carefully, we can almost hear them in the second temple, singing the prayerful words of Psalm 90:

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations."

2--GOD'S HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE

But, according to the prophet Isaiah, God's dwelling place wasn't meant to be a house of prayer just for the Jews. When, in verse one, Isaiah has the Lord saying, "Maintain justice," the prophet didn't mean "maintain just us." The salvation of God wasn't given exclusively for the children of Abraham. The prophet Isaiah had a vision of God's house as a place of prayer for all people.

So, who did Isaiah mean by "all people"? Isaiah 56 gives a couple specific examples. The first of those is foreigners. Due to conquering kings and exiles; due to the capture and kidnapping of slaves; due to immigration, commercial travel, and intermarriage; there were always some people not of Jewish descent who came into contact with the Hebrew faith. We can tell from other scriptures that the purists among the Jews tried to keep those foreigners at a distance. Those most worried about obeying the Jewish laws of ritual cleanliness wanted clear boundaries between who was in and who was out, who were God's chosen people and who were not. Jewish legalists didn't want anyone dwelling in God's house of prayer who couldn't trace their lineage back to the Exodus.

But, in Isaiah's understanding, God did not want the foreigner to feel excluded. God did not want people of other ancestry to feel like they had to leave, just because the Jews would be returning home and rebuilding their temple. God's house of prayer wasn't a good-old-boys club where you had to show your birthright and pedigree. Dwelling in God's house of prayer was an opportunity for all who would embrace God's covenant, for all who would want to join in, for all who would rejoice in keeping the Sabbath, for all who would want to praise and worship at God's altar. No matter their nationality, skin color, or first language, foreigners who wished to participate would be more than welcome to dwell in God's house of prayer.

In Isaiah 56:3-5, we read about another specific group of people who should also be welcomed in God's house of prayer. Today, we rarely use the word "eunuch," so we have to think about what it means. Bible scholars and anthropologists have tried hard to figure this out too. Apparently, there are

several possibilities. A man could have been considered a eunuch because of how his body was anatomically shaped—either by birth or by an accidental injury. Another type of eunuch was a man whose body was intentionally castrated. This was sometimes done to household servants and high-level officials who might have access to the king's harem. Rendered impotent, they couldn't interfere with the king's lineage. Another type of eunuch was a man who wasn't attracted to women, or, for whatever reason, didn't produce children. In all those cases, Isaiah's God taught, "Don't let the eunuch say, 'I'm just a dry tree.'" The lack of child-bearing should not be a deal breaker for those who dwell in God's house of prayer. In verse 4, God said, "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."

Isaiah's understanding of God's house was different than the Jewish law in Deuteronomy 23, where men with body irregularities and some foreigners were prohibited from gathering in the assembly of the Lord. As the Jews were rebuilding their temple and getting ready to worship in Jerusalem again, they were trying to get everything in order. I'm sure there was a lot of discussion and debate. Would they follow all those old laws, or would they update them for their new time and place in history? The God described in Isaiah 56 definitely wanted to make some changes that would offer grace, inclusion, and open-minded welcome.

This open-hearts, open-minds, open-doors policy welcomed returning Jews who had previously been cast out in exile. It allowed for foreigners and eunuchs. And, in Isaiah 56:8, God indicated a big etcetera. Casting the net wide, God said, "I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

That reminds me of the song we sang a couple Sundays ago using a music video on the TV. Do you remember? The lyrics go like this:

I don't know if you've got some shelter,
a place where you can hide.
I don't know if you live with friends
with whom you can confide.

I don't know if you've got a family,
say a mom or dad.
I don't know if you feel love at all,
but I bet you wish you had.
Come, and go with me to my Father's house.
It's a big, big house with lots and lots of room.
It's a big, big table with lots and lots of food.
It's a big, big yard where we can play football.
It's a big, big house. It's my Father's house.²

According to Isaiah 56, dwelling in God's house of prayer is like that. It's big and welcoming for all people.

CONCLUSION

So, you might be wondering, why am I preaching this sermon during our stewardship drive? Well, because it goes with the theme of dwelling in God's house. As Jacob's story reminded us, we have dreams about the promise of this land and this building. As King Hezekiah's story reminded us, the music, preaching, and teaching ministries of this church help us prioritize worship. And, yes, I thought it might also be inspiring to us to recognize that, when we make our pledges to this house of God we call First United Methodist Church, we're not just supporting a house of prayer for us whom God has already gathered in. God has other people out there also, and God would like to gather them in here with us. If you agree with the prophet Isaiah about that, then I hope you will pray seriously about the dollar amount you write on your pledge card. Stretch that number as far as you can so that we can invite and include as many folks as possible to come and dwell with us in God's house of prayer for all people.

¹Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman, 10/27/16.

²Audio Adrenaline, c. 1993.