

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/13/2011, Pentecost 9A
Isaiah 56:1-8, Matthew 15:21-28
Hope for the Foreign Proselyte, the Barren, and the Eunuch

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” (Isaiah 56:3, RSV)

WHO MAY ENTER THE CONGREGATION OF THE LORD?

Today’s Bible readings stir deep waters. The underlying question is “Who may be part of the household of God?” That is where we want to be: we want to be part of the household of the Lord, that’s for sure! Those who are part of God’s household have everything good thing to look forward to. If the Lord holds us dear, if the Lord counts us as his children, then in the end it is going to mean everything to us. For he shall be our Rock and our Salvation, our Refuge and Fortress against the storms of life. He shall lead us into green pastures by still waters. He shall wipe away the tears from every eye. He shall calm our fears and fulfill our hopes and dreams, every one of them, to the degree that they are noble and godly. And many of our hopes and dreams are indeed noble and godly, and it will mean a lot to us to see their fulfillment. Altogether, if we are part of the household of God, then it means that we will not have lived in vain. The yearning for eternity that each of us has shall be answered and we shall be happy.

Only, are we part of it all? It is a question worthy of deep passions.

We witnessed some of those deep passions a couple weeks ago when St. Paul was talking about what he would be willing to give up if only his people, the Jews, would come to Jesus Christ. Why, he would be willing to give up his own soul! It was a remarkable passage because of its context. In just the preceding chapter St. Paul had reached the pinnacle of praise for God. He was bursting with confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. His magnificent words are cherished in the church to this day:

³⁸For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39, KJV)

And yet in the very next chapter, the apostle says that he would be willing to throw it all away for the sake of his people. What he held to be impossible -- that he should be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus -- he could will to be both possible and true if only his people could come to Christ. He could will to be lost if Israel could be found. It is a great measure of how important the question is, "Who is part of God's household?" Paul is deeply moved with longing that Israel should see the fulfillment of her ancient promises by coming to Jesus Christ.

Today's readings go in the opposite direction. Today's readings are confident about Israel. The question about God's household does not concern Israel, but rather two groups whose status was questionable. Indeed, for one of these groups, their status was worse than questionable: they were simply forbidden to be part of Israel. I am speaking of the foreign proselyte, whose fate was uncertain, and of the eunuch, who was lost, according to the ancient rule of Deuteronomy Chapter 23. The eunuch shall not enter the assembly of the LORD. The King James Version expresses the rule in its blunt but quaint way:

¹He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 23:1, KJV)

On top of this deep bodily sorrow, then, there was this sorrow too: that the eunuch could not enter the congregation of the LORD.

But in today's readings, we find hope for both the foreigner and for the eunuch. In spite of the clear law going back to Deuteronomy, there is hope nonetheless for the foreigner and for the eunuch. Let them not despair:

³Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." (Isaiah 56:3, RSV)

Let's look at these two groups. First, the foreigner who wants to come to Christ, and then the eunuch.

THE CANAANITE WOMAN

The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a great story of hope for us Gentiles. The woman is moved by love for her daughter, who suffers terribly because of a demon. The mother has heard of Jesus. She has heard that he has healed others. She is determined that he should save her daughter too. So, she knocks on heaven's door. Again and again, God bless her, she knocks. She is a great Biblical example of perseverance in prayer.

The disciples try to send her away, but they fail in this. So, they complain to Jesus:

And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” (Matthew 15:23, RSV)

Jesus seems to side with the disciples. He lives by the old rule that the Jews are the Chosen People and his ministry is to them:

²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 15:24, RSV)

But the woman is not deterred by this. She seems to brush by the disciples and enter right into the house where Jesus is. I imagine him looking up at her with surprise, but also, I like to think, with secret joy at her determination.

She kneels before Jesus and makes her request. Very simply, she prays her Kyrie:

²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” (Matthew 15:25, RSV)

Then Jesus deals quite harshly with her, comparing her to a dog:

²⁶And he answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26, RSV)

Now, the old preachers believed that Jesus was motivated here not by rudeness, but by confidence in the woman. He spoke to her in this harsh way because he knew about her that her trust in God was so strong and her love for her daughter so deep that she would burst forth in a great testimony, which she did:

²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (Matthew 15:27, RSV)

And this in turn permitted Jesus to praise her faith and to heal her daughter:

²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:28, RSV)

This theme appears again and again in the story of Jesus: there is hope for the Gentiles. And so, some of the great heroes of the Bible are Gentiles, like the Samaritan woman at the well, the Good Samaritan, and the anonymous centurion at the cross of Christ who gave the great testimony concerning Jesus:

And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God. (Mark 15:39, KJV)

This openness of Jesus to both the Jews and the Gentiles reaches its summit and clear principle in our Lord's great commission to the Church:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: (Matthew 28:19, KJV)

We are accustomed to the idea that Jesus welcomes Gentiles into the Church. It is hard for us to understand what an astonishing and controversial idea this was back in the early days of the Church. But whether we are accustomed to the idea or no, still Gentiles have reason to be very grateful that the Lord is willing to include them in his household.

THE EUNUCH

But now, let's turn to the eunuch. His case is harder. As we have heard, there was a clear and ancient law against the hopes of the eunuch.

But that is why today's reading from Isaiah 56 is so interesting. This reading looks beyond the old rule. Surely, Isaiah knew of Deuteronomy's law against receiving the eunuch into the household of God. Yet, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah's heart and mind soar ahead to a better time. And so, he is led to prophesy that there will come a day when the eunuch will be accepted into the household of God too:

...and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." ⁴For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵I 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 which shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:3-5, RSV)

We believe that Isaiah's prophecy here is fulfilled in the Church. That is the great drama of the New Testament story of the Ethiopian eunuch. "What is to prevent me from being baptized," the eunuch asks Philip. Answer: Nothing!

³⁶And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" ^{37,38}And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. (Acts 8:36-38, RSV)

What a moving lament that is! “Behold, I am a dry tree.” We are stirring deep waters here, I say.

Isaiah’s sympathy for the eunuch is akin to the Bible’s sympathy for the barren woman. Think of Hannah praying in the temple. She is so very sad because she has no children. She weeps there in the temple and she prays. The King James Version puts it this way:

And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore. (1 Sam 1:10, KJV)

Her heart is so sad that all she can do is mumble her prayers, and the priest looking on, Eli, misinterprets her grief and accuses her of being a drunken woman. Eli misunderstands, but our God does not. He knows her deep need and he grants it, so that she becomes the mother of the mighty prophet Samuel.

Likewise with Sarah long before her. She and Abraham hoped for a child, and in old age, far beyond the childbearing age, she had a son, Isaac.

WE ALL BECOME BARREN

We all seem to become barren at some point in life. Men and women, single and married, young and old: in this fallen world, we are liable to become lonely, filled with longings, and conscious of being unfulfilled in some deep manner.

But the Bible believes in hope, because it knows a good God. So, just as Isaiah preached hope for the eunuch, so he preached hope for the childless woman. In Chapter 54, we find these great words:

¹“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD. ²Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; hold not back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. ³For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities. (Isaiah 54:1-3, RSV)

IF FOR THIS LIFE ONLY...

Again, in this fallen world, each of us seems to become barren at some point. Each of seems to become a eunuch. Maybe there is a bodily incapacity, such as illness or old age. Maybe there is simply the failure of romance, or widowhood, or widowerhood, for some long stretch of life. Maybe there is a solemn incapacity, as for the one takes on vows of celibacy when entering the priesthood, the monastery, or the convent. We have deep longings, yet for some stretch of life we might have to say to ourselves that we are unfulfilled. We might have to echo the eunuch’s lament, “I am a dried tree.”

If for this life only we have hoped, then we have hoped too little:

¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:19-22, NRSV)

Our Lord Jesus came that we might have life, aye, have it more abundantly. (John 10:10). So seek fullness of life, even now. Seek it as best you can, by every noble method available to you, knowing that your Lord Jesus wants you to have fullness of life. And when your seeking is done, do not give up, for this earthly life is simply the narthex to the great cathedral of eternal life, where our God shall fulfill us entire and satisfy our souls, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.