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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 56:1-8, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15:21-28
Joining Ourselves to the Lord

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

In my sermon this morning, I want to lift up a phrase from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 56. It is the phrase “join themselves to the LORD.” As I read aloud our text, notice that it is speaking of “foreigners” – of outsiders, Gentiles, people who are forever distinguished by the fact that they are *not* the children of Abraham. Our text promises good things to the foreigner. It goes this way:

⁶And the foreigners who *join themselves to the LORD*, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant -- ⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; (Isaiah 56:6-7, RSV)

It is the key thing, this joining of ourselves to the Lord. It meant all the difference in the world, for example, for the woman of Canaan in this morning's Gospel story. Indeed, it meant the immediate healing of her daughter. This woman is one of the Gentile foreigners of whom Isaiah spoke. If ever a person joined herself to Jesus in a plain, practical, undeniable way, it was this determined woman who fought her way through the twelve disciples and through the harsh words of Jesus himself to kneel before him and pray her Kyrie, “Help me, Lord.” She laid hold on the Lord and would not let go. She is a moving example of someone who throws herself upon the mercy of the Lord. She had heard that Jesus was a good man with power to heal and cast out demons, and she wanted that. She wanted it not from greed for her own benefit but from a better cause: love for her daughter. So she joined herself to the Lord in her unbreakable fashion so that Jesus cried in admiration, “great is your faith.” And the daughter was healed because the mother joined herself to the Lord.

Again, joining ourselves to the Lord is the key matter in life for us. So, in my sermon I want to address three questions: (1) Who is worthy to join themselves to the Lord? (2) How do we go about doing this — joining ourselves to the Lord? And (3) Is it important that we should *stay* joined to the Lord? I'll tell you now, I think it is! For this is what we want: to stay joined to the Rock of our Salvation. Let's begin with my first question, Who is worthy?

Who is worthy?

I suppose that the ancient Israelite saw humanity marching by and at first said, “Well, *their* gods are going to have to save them if they are going to be saved. As for us, we will cling to the LORD. He is our God.”

But in the course of time Israel came to believe that, in fact, there are *no other* gods. The other gods are just idols, pretenders, breakers of our heart in the end. Indeed, the great book from which this morning’s First Lesson comes – Isaiah – makes the point quite clearly. Isaiah describes the futile work of the one who fashions an idol, dismissing that poor, dumb, tottering idol:

¹⁸To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? ¹⁹An idol? — A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains... then seeks out a skilled artisan to set up an image that will not topple. (Isaiah 40:18-20. NRSV)

So, what of the world passing by now if the other gods are but dumb idols? There are an awful lot of good people out there, we can imagine Israel saying. Those good folks might not be Jews, they are hopelessly worshiping their idols or have found no god to worship at all so far, yet they are impressive people nonetheless. Indeed, they are of that noble race to which we ourselves belong: they are human beings! So what is to become of them if they have been casting their hopes on dumb idols or have not yet found the true God?

And now we come to this morning’s insight about the world marching by: they too are welcome to Israel’s God — the real God. Both the Gentile and the eunuch and the sinner: they are all welcome to pin their hopes on the God of Israel, who will not let them down.

Catholic

This morning’s Bible readings are about what is called the “catholicity” of the church. It is the third of the four marks of the church: one, holy, *catholic*, and apostolic.

When I was a seminarian, I heard about a city church somewhere that was then all closed and boarded up, but that, back in the day, had been a flourishing Lutheran church. Back when the neighborhood was German and Polish, that city church had done fine. But the neighborhood had changed. The German and Polish people had moved to the suburbs, and African-American folk had moved in. But this Lutheran Church did not welcome black folk. Indeed, when African-Americans walked up the steps of the church, the ushers would greet them, point down the street, and say, “Your church is over there.”

This is a violation of the catholic nature of the church. This is an offense to the Lord of the church. We should firmly believe that Jesus agrees with the children’s Sunday School song:

Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
they are precious in his sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world

And no matter how big or old any of us are, we are still the little children of the world beloved of God!

This morning's reading from Isaiah 56 is part of the story of this universality of God's love. As my teacher Robert Jenson once put it, if anyone in the church is unwelcome to me, it is I who does not belong, not that one.

Indeed, all three of our assigned Bible readings defend various groups of people who might have been thought excluded. Our First Lesson welcomes the Gentile and the eunuch. Some people might think the eunuch mangled and somehow reduced. But not the Lord. The Lord welcomes the eunuch. Our Second Lesson defends the Jews from the terrible temptation besetting the church all these years: the notion called "Supersessionism" — the false idea that the Church somehow displaces Israel as the people of God. Terrible things have been done to the Jews in the spirit of Supersessionism. Saint Paul defends the Jews in the striking way of reminding the Gentiles that they are but wild olive branches grafted onto the cultivated olive tree. And our Gospel Lesson gives a most dramatic account of the Lord of the church accepting and indeed praising the faith of the Canaanite woman who interceded with him on behalf of her daughter. All of these readings are part of the background for what the Creeds say about the Church: the Church is catholic. It is universal. It welcomes everyone.

How to join ourselves to God

Let's move on to our second question: "How do we join ourselves to the Lord?"

In one sense, this is easy. Joining yourself to God is like jumping onto a merry-go-round: wherever there is an empty horse, dash right to it and take your place.¹ Joining yourself to God is like running onto the subway as the doors are about to shut: Get on at *any* point, and you are on your way — on your way to heaven, unless, sadly, you fall off that train. The invitations of the Lord to humanity and the promises he gives are various and numerous. Surely something will tug on your heart if you give yourself a chance. Then, take that promise to heart. Become Christ's man, Christ's woman in that you cling to that promise.

¹ Spurgeon does not express things quite this way, but the idea comes from his sermon of 1879 "Taking Hold of God's Covenant." There is quite a contrast between the revivalist's mourner's bench, which places so much drama on the process of coming to the Lord, versus Spurgeon's almost joyful encouragement to dash for the Lord at whatever point touches your heart.

For example, Jesus says this:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

So, do you labor in this world? Are you heavy laden? Could you use some rest? Then “come unto” Jesus. That is your spot on the merry-go-round. Dash to it, you weary ones.

Another example. This one is from Saint Paul writing to young Timothy:

This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. (1 Timothy 1:15, KJV)

Are you, then, a sinner? Yes. Then success! You have found your spot. “Oh, but I am not just a sinner, I am an extraordinary sinner. I am a deep and relentless sinner. I have done much damage in this world. Could Saint Paul mean me — one such as me?” To this St. Paul answers, “It matters not if you are an extreme sinner. Even if you were the *chief* of sinners, Christ Jesus came to save you.”

What if you are a street walker? Then you qualify to come to Jesus:

³⁷And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, ³⁸And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner. (Luke 7:37-39, KJV)

What matters to Jesus about this woman was not that she was a sinner, but that she loved him much.

⁴⁴And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. ⁴⁵Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶My head with oil thou didst not

anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.
⁴⁷Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. ⁴⁸And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. (Luke 7:44-48, KJV)

And well she should love him. It seems to have been with her as with the woman caught in adultery — the one Jesus saved from being stoned. He gave her a new lease on life: Go, and sin no more (John 8:11).

Are you blind, lame, sick? Then you qualify:

And great multitudes came unto him, having with them those that were lame, blind, dumb, maimed, and many others, and cast them down at Jesus' feet; and he healed them: (Matthew 15:30, KJV)

Is it the eleventh hour and it hardly seems fair to you that you should turn to Christ so late in life? Then think of the thief on the cross and take encouragement:

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43, KJV)

Are you a eunuch? Are you someone who is no longer capable of producing children? Are you someone who, for whatever reason sighs and says, “Behold, I am a dry tree”?² What a lament that is! The Lord’s promise to one who imagines that he or she is dry tree is a wonderful one — a hint of which we can see in the love and delight we can take in people who are not related to us but whom we love as our own children. I see such delight in the eyes of our congregation, for example, when we watch our Children’s Choir sing. So, the Lord promises the eunuch that he will have something better than children:

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 56:4-5, RSV)

I dare say that heaven will be the perfection of this promise, where we will love everyone there and delight in them through all eternity as if they were our own children.

² Isaiah 56:3, RSV, from this morning’s First Lesson.

The woman of Canaan: you might call her bold, even stubborn. But Jesus calls her a person of great faith. The welfare of her daughter was her point of need, and so, her point of attachment to Jesus. She had heard good things about this man Jesus and she lays claim to them for herself.

Let us do the same, though we be ever so sinful, blind, lame, disreputable, weary, heavy laden, or at the very eleventh hour of life. Lay claim on the many promises of Jesus. Take them as applying to you. And be baptized.

Last question: Must we stay with the Lord?

Finally, let me offer a few words about the last of my three questions: Must we *stay* with the Lord? Suppose we have come to place our hopes on Jesus, we have been baptized, and we live in communion with Christ. Would it then be a disaster for us to turn aside from him? After all, few of us are saints. Most of are glad to be the sheep of our Lord's pasture, but then, it is the nature of sheep that we wander. We drift. We relax. We become preoccupied with other things. The fervor of our faith cools. We look up one day and notice that we don't pray much anymore, we skip church quite a lot, we fail to offer our tithes and offerings. We regret it, we mean to do better in the future, but for now, we have drifted away from the Lord. Is that so bad? Are we ruining something important?

Answer: perhaps we are! Maybe our neighbors or loved ones are already starting to notice the difference, for our integrity seems not so strong as it used to be. Or maybe no one notices a change in us. Nonetheless, there are solemn passages in the New Testament that would urge us to hasten back to the Lord if we judge that we have strayed from him. Especially I am thinking of that word "abide." Jesus, you see, not only wants us to come to him, but also to "abide" in him. Indeed, if we do not abide in him, we risk rendering ourselves subject to the lament of the eunuch about being a "dried tree." It is the repeated theme of Jesus in John 15:

⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (John 15:6, NRS)

So, this matter of abiding in Christ is no game.

They say that colonial Lutheran preachers used to stroll up and down the aisle and stop before someone and question him or her on the faith, like this, "Sister ____, tell us, what is the Third Commandment." And when the preacher had a quiet moment with a church member, he would probe the state of that one's soul, like this, "Brother ____, tell me this, for it is an important question, Are you abiding in Christ? Or have you strayed away?" I don't know about this business of quizzing someone on the catechism right there in the middle of the sermon. But perhaps it is a good question for each of us to ask, in the quiet of the night or when we are strolling in Central Park or some good time in life, "Now, honestly, am I abiding

in Christ?" I bet you are, for after all, you are here in church. Still, it is a good question for each of us. It is a soul-searching question.

Just as joining ourselves to the Lord brings every hope in life, as it brought healing to the woman of Canaan's daughter, so departing from him can do us no good – neither in the life to come, nor in this life stretching before us. It is never to our advantage to break faith with Jesus, no matter what the allures of sin.

Departing from him can only mean diminishing ourselves the moment we do it.

Disciples follow their master. It is the natural and rational thing to do. Disciples stick to their master. That's what it means to be a disciple. Who can claim to be a disciple when he or she walks away from the Master? Branches abide in the vine. Sheep follow their shepherd, and if they should stray, he seeks them, welcomes them back, and the angels in heaven rejoice. Christians follow Christ, and if we should stray, we best hasten on back to him and pick up the path again. Return to Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and hear his continual words to you: "My body, my blood, for you for the forgiveness of sin." And if you need it, Private Confession and Absolution are available to you to help you along in your repentance.

In the language of our First Lesson, we should "hold fast the covenant":

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, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and *holds fast my covenant* -- ⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer..." (Isaiah 56:6-7, RSV)

The one who "holds fast my covenant" is the one who not only begins to walk with the Lord but continues in the ways of the Lord. He is true to the covenant. He holds up his end of the relationship as best he can, as best she can. The one who "holds fast my covenant" is the one who means to echo in his own life the words of St. Paul at the end of his life:

⁶ For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: ⁸Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6-8, KJV)

Indeed, the one who continues to be joined to the Lord is the one who aims to look back on life when all is said and done and to give the good testimony that in some true measure he tried, she tried, to be faithful to the One who healed the Canaanite woman's daughter, who is always faithful to us, and to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.