

Is 56:1-8  
14 August 2011

“Purity and Love”

Is looking someone in the eye and telling them a lie **ever** the right thing to do? When we were in school, talking about philosophical or ethical questions, sometimes the teacher would ask us stuff like that. We might be given the scenario of living under Nazi rule, and the Gestapo shows up at the door. The law says that no one is allowed to provide shelter to Jews, and yet, there’s a family hiding in your attic.

Is looking the officer in the eye and telling him that there are no Jews in your house the right thing to do? That would be breaking the law; that would also be telling a lie! (Admittedly, I’m using a ridiculously extreme example to make a point.)

And that point is that we often experience these kinds of conflicts, not only in society at large, but also within ourselves. I’m speaking of the conflict between the law (however it is devised) and the good. I’m speaking of the competing claims that we rightfully feel between what will ensure order and what will ensure justice. It’s part of human nature.

So with all that in mind, I had a bit of a problem coming up with a title for the sermon. As I thought about both scripture readings [the other is Mt 15:21-28], I had some trouble putting my feelings into words. I considered other options, like “Law and Gospel,” or “Law and Grace.”

However, those words do carry some baggage, some unintentional meanings. Part of it is the way many people see the Old Testament as pitted against the New Testament. You know what I mean: the Old Testament is all about law, while the New Testament is all about gospel, good news. It’s all about grace.

The problem is that each testament has plenty of both. Each testament has law; each testament has grace. God doesn’t have a split personality! It’s not a case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

We see in the Old Testament God’s covenant with Israel. Even when they fail to uphold the law, God is gracious, faithful with redeeming love. And in the New Testament, the followers of Jesus may not use the word “law,” but we see rules and regulations being established. That’s been the case **throughout** the history of the church. It’s true with us today.

With the title “Purity and Love,” I’m trying, on the one hand, to capture the sense of setting up boundaries, keeping something pure. On the other hand, there’s also the understanding that boundaries can do more harm than good, to know when it’s necessary to cross boundaries for the sake of love.

I’m not saying that purity and love are opposed to each other. In their “purest” form, they live happily together. But in our clumsy human hands, they sometimes **do work** against each other. Try to keep these things in mind as we go along; I’ll try to make it clearer as we continue.

Our Old Testament text is the beginning of the third major section of the book of Isaiah; it’s sometimes called Third Isaiah. We’re looking at a time in the late sixth century B.C. (roughly 530-520). This is after the Babylonians have been conquered by

the Persians. Cyrus the Persian institutes a new policy. Any Jewish exiles who want to leave the country are free to do so.

After all this time, these first exiles return to a land that has been settled by other people. It's safe to say that they are less than thrilled by this bunch coming back from Babylon. These returning exiles seem to think that they actually **own** the place! The Jewish people recognize that they have their work cut out for them.

Frederick Gaiser describes it well. "The question for Israel was how it should reconstitute itself... Was this the time to circle the wagons and defend past traditions in the face of the chaotic conditions...being a province of Persia, subject to dangerous foreign influences? Some said yes, [finding support] for their stance in the many parts of God's law that call for purity, holiness and separation from the world."<sup>1</sup>

There's the first option I spoke of earlier: the very legitimate and understandable concern for law, for purity. It's the concern to make sure that our identity doesn't get watered down—even more basic than that, to make sure that our community can just stay alive!

He continues, "Others thought this might be a time to welcome the stranger and open the doors to new possibilities. Those who made this argument pointed to God's call to be a city on the hill and a blessing to the nations."<sup>2</sup> Both sides could claim fidelity and find good biblical support."

There's the second option. This is the feeling that change has occurred; there's no point in denying it. It's the feeling that this is who we are. If we are the people of God, then that sets a higher standard. It's true; we are surrounded by pagan nations. But that only underlines the need to show God's love.

In our scripture reading, the prophet is arguing for that second option. He does insist on keeping the sabbath. It really is a timeless marker of God's people—the original legislation for worker's rights! But notice how the prophet quotes the Lord in verse 1 about doing "justice" and "what is right."

The way he defines that might sound surprising. Look at verse 3: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'" If that **doesn't** sound surprising, we need to consider that the prophet, speaking for God, reinterprets what the Torah says about such people.

Deuteronomy 23 says, "No Ammonite or Moabite—or any of their descendants, even in the tenth generation—may be included among the Lord's people" (v. 3). The reason given is that they didn't help the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt. However, Isaiah 56 takes a very different view. Absolutely **no** foreigners are to be rejected, provided that they live according to verse 6, provided that they keep the Lord's covenant.

And that's important. Is the prophet saying that it's okay to simply import whatever pagan ways strike your fancy? Not quite! That would not be keeping the Lord's covenant. That would not be joining oneself to the Lord...loving the name of the Lord...serving the Lord.

Still, a few generations later, Ezra and Nehemiah take a different view. They go with option number one. They are alarmed that the law is being ignored. There's a

<sup>1</sup> [www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3404](http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3404)

<sup>2</sup> Is 2:2, Gn 26:4

reference to the “holy seed,” or the “holy race,” whose purity is threatened by mixed marriage (Ezra 9:2).

They even read the same passage we just heard. Nehemiah 13 says, “On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God...When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel **all those** of foreign descent” (vv. 1, 3). That involved breaking up families.

But it’s not just foreigners our prophet invites. He includes the eunuchs, those who have been castrated. Again, Deuteronomy 23, which is pretty blunt: “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (v. 1). That sounds harsh, but to be fair, there was a concern about ritual genital mutilation.

Let me bring us back to verse 3. The foreigner is told not to say, “The Lord won’t accept me.” The eunuch is told not to say, “I’m just a dry tree.” Understand, those are names they’ve been called. The foreigner has been told, “You can never be one of God’s people!” The eunuch has been told, “You’re a dry tree!” But these people are not enemies. They want to serve the Lord!

The late George Knight, professor of Hebrew, commented, “To be described as ‘a dry tree’ referred to a man or woman who could not share in God’s command to create children.”<sup>3</sup> However, the prophet reinterprets the Torah, and so, “God himself now ‘gives’ to the unmarried woman, the bachelor, the widow, the homosexual an equally valid...place in the Covenant, even though these folk are unable to form a link in the...chain of human life.”

The Lord says to the eunuch who keeps the covenant, “I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters” (v. 5). Biologically, they may not have offspring, but they can receive something much better. And to the foreigners who love the Lord: “these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (v. 7). This is the universal reign of God.

We have, on the one hand, purity; we have on the other hand, love. I hope we can see in the Bible how the people of God struggle with the two. In the New Testament, the church has that struggle. And of course, we have that struggle today. As I suggested, it’s part of human nature.

Both concerns are enshrined in the Biblical tradition. Both are important. The priests, like Ezra, are involved with the law and maintaining the purity and holiness of the community. The prophets, speaking the word from God, are there to remind everyone when the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faith—are being neglected (Mt 23:23).

Where are **we** in our purity? Where are **we** in our love? How much attention do we pay to one or the other? How much do we **emphasize** one, rather than the other?

Even as I ask those questions, I should issue a warning. Do not think for a moment that our purity, our love—or our **idea** of purity and love—is adequate. It is much easier than we imagine for **our** purity to turn into judgment, a burden we put on others and ourselves. It is also easier than we imagine for **our** love to turn into carelessness, that is, lack of concern.

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<sup>3</sup> George A. F. Knight, *Isaiah 56-66: The New Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 8.

Fortunately for us, God has a different measure of success than we do. We shouldn't pretend that any purity or love we find in ourselves is an achievement. God looks for any deficit, any shortcoming, that we're willing to offer. It has been wisely said that "God rushes to fill any emptiness, longing, or desire that we offer. If you offer your completeness, God knows it is not true."<sup>4</sup>

I would say that this goes well with the Lord's embrace and exaltation of the "nobodies" in our scripture text: those who are impure and unloved. It goes well with the impure and unloved parts within each of us.

So, with those cautions in mind, I again ask: where are we in our purity? Where are we in our love?

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 268.