



Sermon Transcript September 16, 2018

Hospitable God, Hospitable People Arms Wide Open Isaiah 56:1-8

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 16, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Isaiah 56:1-8

¹ Thus says the Lord: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. ² Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”

³ Let 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.”

⁴ For thus says the Lord: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵ 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.

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, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for ⁸my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

⁸ The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”

Introduction

When I consider our passage this morning, I can't help but see God's amazing love for us. I think of the opening lines to the hymn, *How Deep The Father's Love For Us*.

How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.

For the past eighteen months, I have been working with our District Superintendent in training three churches in our district; helping them develop a contextualized "way of life" that is built around the irreducible core of loving God, loving others and making disciples. In other words, what are some of the best ways we can live out these core principles in our church setting? In every church setting the application looks a little different. One church was from Maine, another from Vermont and another from New Hampshire. Each church had a pastor and an elder who met with us seven times for two days over the span of eighteen months. Needless to say, over time we grew rather close together. This week was our final meeting.

At the end of our time together, we asked each pastor and elder to share how they were feeling about their church and the process ahead of them as they sought to apply what they were learning. After each church shared how they were feeling, we gathered around them and prayed over them. After we prayed for the first church, one of the elders said, "I could really sense our love for each other through our prayers." And then another elder said this, "And that is but a drop in the bucket compared to God's love for us." That statement caught my attention. "How deep the Father's love for us, How vast beyond all measure."

We learn in Zephaniah 3:17 that God will "*quiet you by his love.*" In Psalm 63:3 we learn that God's "*steadfast love is better than life.*" Psalm 136 has 26 verses and each verse ends with the repetitive chorus, "*his love endures forever.*" God's love for us is a covenantal love. He has made promise and he has secured that promise through the death of Jesus on the cross. Therefore, as Paul says in Romans 8, nothing "*will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.*" God loves you.

I think of another hymn that poetically captures the vast love of God for us.

Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made
Were every stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade

To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky

O love of God, how rich and pure
How measureless and strong
It shall forevermore endure
The saints' and angels' song

As we work our way through Isaiah 56:1-8, I want you to see the love of God. In this passage, you will see that God's love is a gracious love. It is a generous love. It is a love that gathers people. We can never talk enough about God's love and we never run the risk of exhausting our understanding of God's love. When we come to this passage, we find a God with his arms held wide open and ready to receive us.

God's Gracious Love

I want us to first consider God's gracious love for us. It may seem odd to suggest that we can consider God's gracious love for us through the first two verses of Isaiah 56:1-2. On the surface, these two verses may not appear to have much to do at all with grace. Instead, we have what appears to be commands to follow. Right out of the gate we read in verse 1, *"Thus says the Lord: 'Keep justice, and do righteousness.'"* It is followed in verse 2 with more words of action, *"Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing evil."* If this was Isaiah's starting point, it would appear that the emphasis of these two verses has to do with what we need to do, our acts of obedience.

Granted, I understand that Isaiah 56 is the beginning of the third section of the book of Isaiah and it marks the starting point for our conversation this Fall. But as you well know, it is far from the starting point for the book of Isaiah. I know this isn't some grand revelation for you, but there are 55 chapters that precede Isaiah 56. These 55 chapters set the context for Isaiah 56-66. These 55 chapters give us the means by which

we are able to respond in obedience to God. These 55 chapters tell the story of God's grace. It is God gracious love that leads us to obedience.

Do you recall the scene in Isaiah 6 when Isaiah saw the vision of the glory of God? Getting a glimpse of the glory of God, Isaiah became very much aware of his own sin and he cried God, "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips.*" Then upon his confession, he receives the cleansing of God, his sins are atoned for and he is forgiven. It is at this point, he answers the call of God and he says, "*Here am I! Send me.*" He becomes God's agent to bring God's message to the people of Israel. John Oswalt suggests that this scene in Isaiah 6 is the outline for the entire book of Isaiah.¹ In the first 39 chapters, Israel's sin is exposed. It is a section that ends with the promise of judgment. If you recall, part of Isaiah's confession was corporate. He also confessed, "*and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.*" But then in chapters 40-55, we learn of how God will send a servant who will atone for sin and through sheer grace make form a people for himself. I think of that wonderful invitation of grace in Isaiah 55, "*Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price.*" You can't buy God's grace. It is freely given to those who receive it. So where does that leave us once we receive God's grace and become part of his covenant people? It leaves us like Isaiah, a people sent into the world to reflect God's character—his justice and his righteousness shine through us.

So on one hand, yes, these commands call us to obedience. We are to "*keep justice and do righteousness.*" As covenant partners with God, we are to take next steps of obedience. That is what it means to be a disciple of Christ. But these steps of obedience are first of all a response to God's grace. In verse 1 Isaiah says, "*Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed.*" It is the promise of salvation that leads us to obedience. But do you know what we are going to discover next week? Even as God's people, who are being transformed by God's grace—we still struggle to "*keep justice and do righteousness.*" We are a struggling people, but we reflect the character of God when we depend upon God and humbly rely on God to empower us to reflect his character in this world.

I often quote from Hebrews 13:20-21 when I pronounce the benediction on a Sunday morning. In it we pray that God may "*equip you with everything good for doing his will, working in us what is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ.*" It is all God's work. We are praying that God would produce within us that work of grace so that we might be pleasing to him. I am saved by grace and transformed by grace. Or as the Heidelberg

Catechism puts it, “Therefore by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.”² In other words, I am saved by God’s grace and I am empowered to live for Christ by God’s grace. It is all God’s grace. As God does this work of grace in us, we become a reflection of the love of God to those around us. God’s love is a gracious love and all glory goes to God.

God’s Generous Love

The second thing we discover about God’s love in this passage is that God’s love is a generous love. In other words, his love is inclusive. Look at how God demonstrates the inclusive nature of his love in verse 3, “*Let 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.’*” This verse tells us that the wonderful grace of God is not only extended to the people of Israel. It is inclusive of all people. The foreigner and the eunuch were once considered outcasts. But now, through faith, they are part of the people of God. “*Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people.’*” God’s generous love is world-wide and his arms are open to all who call on his name. His arms are open to you and to me.

Now as Isaiah addresses both the eunuch and the foreigner, you do discover that there is something required of them to enjoy the blessings of being part of the family of God. In verses 4 and 6 it says of both the eunuch and the foreigner that they need to “*hold fast my covenant*” and they must “*keep my Sabbaths.*” In verse 4 he says of the eunuch, “*To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant.*” And then in verse 6, nearly the identical qualifier is given to the foreigner, “*everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant.*”

What does it mean to “*hold fast my covenant?*” The word *covenant* is an important word. It is the word that divides our Bibles into two parts. The Old Testament and the New Testament is another way of saying the “old covenant” and the “new covenant.” It is through covenant that God forms relationship with us and makes promise to restore this broken world. I like what Motyer says about “*holding fast my covenant.*” He says, “Since the Lord’s covenant is first the pledge he makes, ‘taking a grip of his covenant’ means taking his promises seriously so as to hold them by faith through thick and thin.”³ *Holding fast* to God’s covenant is to put your faith in what God promises.

What is the promise of God that we are to “hold fast to?” In the second part of Isaiah, the prophet starts talking about a new covenant that God is making with his people. In

Isaiah 49:8 it is a covenant tied to the coming servant who will make atonement for sin. In Isaiah 54:10 it is referred to as a covenant of peace and in Isaiah 55:3 it is an eternal covenant. All three of these elements are brought together in Jesus in Hebrews 13:20, *“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant, brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep.”* Oswalt says, “every living person is invited to become a partaker of eternity’s most amazing offer: God committing himself to the good of his people no matter what it may cost him.”⁴ It is through the cross that God seals his generous promise to forgive us. We hold fast to the covenant by holding fast to Jesus.

Once we come to faith in Christ, God begins to change us. That is the point being made when Isaiah says of the eunuchs, *“who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me.”* Those who are in covenant with God express it through obedience to God. In the Old Testament, one of the markers that someone was part of the covenant community was that they observed the Sabbath. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 tells us that the Sabbath was established for the nation of Israel to recall how God delivered them from slavery in the land of Egypt. And so by saying that the eunuchs and the foreigners were “keeping the Sabbath” was indicating that they were now part of the covenant people of God. There are different markers under the new covenant that indicate we are part of God’s people. For example, in the New Testament we observe baptism and communion as people of the new covenant. We also gather to worship, not because we are keeping the Sabbath, but because we are told that we shouldn’t neglect coming together. As part of the covenant people of God, our lives are now ordered around Christ.

Notice what God does when the eunuch and the foreigner turn in faith to Christ. The eunuch is unable to reproduce and so there is no family line after him. But God says of the eunuch, *“I will give him a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”* He becomes part of the family of God. That is what Jesus said in John 1:12-13, *“But to all who did receive him, who believe in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God, who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”* Jesus looked at his disciples and said, *“Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* In Christ, we are family. We are to take care of each other. And we will never be cut off.

To the foreigner, God says in verse 7, *“these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar.”* He is basically saying that the foreigner who holds fast to Christ will have

equal access to God. He can talk with God and enter into relationship with God. And furthermore, he can serve God.

I can't imagine going through life without God. A recent Gallup Poll confirmed what many of us suspected, church attendance across the board is on the decline in the United States. I read several articles processing the recent release of this data. One of the articles was a secular article with a rather catchy title, "When church attendance goes down, what do the faithful lose?"⁵ It is fascinating to me to consider the findings of a recent study suggesting the two primary things that are lost with the loss of church attendance. First of all, there was a loss of community and with that came an increase in loneliness. Interestingly, there was no other substitute that could provide the kind of community that was gained through houses of worship. The second cost to pulling away from the church was the loss of happiness. It begs the question, "what really makes a person happy?" Referencing C. S. Lewis, the article said that authentic worship should be joyful and it sustains our values and forces us to look towards others. And so happiness is not found in being self-absorbed, which is what tends to happen when God is removed from the picture.

With this survey in the background, reconsider what the generous love of God brings to the eunuch and the foreigner. He says of the eunuch who turns to holds fast to the covenant, "*I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.*" In Christ, we are given an eternal family. It is an invitation to community. To the foreigner it is said that they have access to God. The psalmist says that God's love is better than life itself. There is peace. There is contentment. There is happiness. There is joy. This is the generous love of God. We find life itself in God.

God's Gathering Love

The final verse gives us a picture of God's gathering love. In verse 8 we read, "*The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, 'I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.'*" It is a great picture of God's love. He is gathering people from all over the world. We are a gathered people. When we gather together like we do on Sunday morning, we are giving a small visible expression of God's gathered people that will someday be fully in his presence.

God long for us to be with him. Why? It is not that he is lonely without us. His desire to gather us is not because he needs us. It is simply because he loves us. Does that amaze you? We ought to feel somewhat surprised, like Zacchaeus, when Jesus comes to

us and points his finger at us and says, “I want to go to your house today!” “Me?” “Are you talking to me?” “You want to be with me?” “Do you know that I have nothing to offer you?” And Jesus looks at us and he says, “Yes, you! I want you to be with me,” Psalm 147:2 says, “*The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcast of Israel.*”

I think of the heart of Jesus on display in Matthew 23:37. You can hear him cry, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not.*” You can hear his heart in his prayer in John 17:24, when he prays, “*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me.*” His desire to gather us to himself is a sign of his love for us.

God’s Love: The Starting Point for Hospitality

It is healing to us to reflect on God’s love for us. It is a simple message, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” But how many times do I forget? How many times do I question whether or not it is true because I know my own failures all too well. But if you hold fast to his covenant—trusting in his promises and building your life around Jesus—you are marked by his love. It is a gracious love. It is a generous love. It is a gathering love.

I really believe that this is the starting point for hospitality. It starts with the gospel. It starts with knowing the gracious, generous and gathering love of God for you. If God is this way to us—outcast and foreigners—what about those neighbors who are—outcast and foreigners? When Isaiah begins this passage with the phrase “*Thus says the Lord, keep justice and do righteousness,*” what he is really saying is that our lives ought to reflect that character of God. Therefore, we ought to be gracious, generous and gathering like God has been to us in Jesus.

At the end of verse 7, there is that familiar verse Jesus quotes when he is clearing the money changers out from the temple. He says, “*my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*” The problem was that they were keeping people away from God because of what they were doing. I wonder how often our lack of hospitality keeps people from God. I wonder if our lack of hospitality is often the result of the divisions and the walls our culture builds between people. One pastor put it this way, “God is opening the door for everyone to come to him and we are not to hinder them from coming. We will not hinder them simply because they wear clothes we do not like, act strange, look funny, smell bad, have different ideas, vote differently, have different

values, come from different cultures, or anything else. God is still calling for more outcasts to come to him (56:8). Woe to us if we do not present to every person the opportunity to hear the gospel and come into a joyful relationship with our God.”⁶

I understand that our love is but a “drop in the bucket” compared to the vast love of God. But don’t underestimate what God can do through that drop of love expressed out of the love God has for you. Ask God to give you a heart for others like God has expressed towards you.

Pray that you would be gracious. Pray that you would be generous. Pray that you would be a gatherer of others. Pray that your arms would open wide to the people and the needs around you. Pray that you would be a reflection of God’s love to others.

¹John Oswalt *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 453

²Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1

³J. Alec Motyer *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 466

⁴Oswalt, 460

⁵Dwight DeWerth-Pallmeyer “When church attendance goes down, what to the faithful lose?”
<http://www2.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/church-attendance-faith-religion-catholic-protestant-20180913.html> September 13, 2018

⁶Brent Kercheville “Isaiah 56:1-8: Who Will Experience God’s Salvation?”
<https://westpalmbeachchurchofchrist.com/isaiah/experience-gods-salvation.html>
Feb. 22, 2015

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**COMMUNITY
GROUPS**

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Thinking back to your childhood, can you recall a “favorite neighbor?” What was it about that neighbor that causes you to remember them fondly?
2. How have you experienced God’s love through other people? Can you think of a recent example?
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Isaiah 56:1-2. What do you think it means “to keep justice and do righteousness?” (see Micah 6:8)
5. Read 56:3. Who would you consider to be “the eunuch and the foreigner” in our communities and what does this passage say about our response to them? How do you find it challenging to be hospitable to the people you identified?
6. Read Isaiah 56:4-7. What are the “hospitality” words that Isaiah uses in this passage to describe our relationship with God? How does that make you feel?
7. Read Isaiah 56:8. What kind of people does God gather around him? What does that tell you about yourself? How does that impact your view of other people who are different than you? What would you like to see “gathered” at our church?

Taking It Home

8. What is one thing you are taking with you from your discussion?
9. Begin discussing how you as a group can practice hospitality together.