



Margined Voices

Rev Cate Thorn

Year A, Ordinary 20

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Matthew 15: 21-28

20 August 2023

Today's readings resonate and ring with the challenge of inclusion. The challenge of the boundaries we create to define who we are and confirm our identity as community which require there to be outsiders.

The first reading from Isaiah comes from what's known as third Isaiah, the account of the Israelites return from exile. God's holy people are returning to what was their homeland. After generations of exile how are they to integrate, where do they position themselves religiously? Isaiah's words are simple and ring clear, "Do what is right! Work for justice! Liberation is about to come and my justice is about to be revealed." Align your actions with the faith you proclaim.

Words may be simple and clear, maybe, but to do what they ask isn't so simple. Verses have been omitted from today's passage. They say that now foreigners and eunuchs are to be included— those previously excluded for being unclean, made outcast from the chosen ones of God. In these new, returning from exile times, those who minister, love and worship Yahweh, who observe Sabbath time and cling to the covenant, it is by doing this, they reveal their inclusion as Yahweh's people. These ones, Yahweh says "I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer... for my house will be called as house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says Yahweh who gathers the outcasts of Israel. I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

This invitation to all people, it comes from God. The community of God is called to respond as a matter of justice. Just as then, we too now, as

people of God in our moment of history, *“have a particular demographic boundary, [and] God is always redefining it to include those left out.”*¹

What a challenge, to include those left out, cast out, outcast.

I met Salvation recently. It was during fine weather so it may've actually been last year. We were composting at the time, it was a big compost day as we were turning compost between the bins. Salvation took the form of a young Pasifika woman, denim shorts, white singlet, long tied back dark hair and a big smile. She knew Lisa-Marie who was also there. The invitation was extended to Salvation to join us. She accepted. The only issue was she had on open large can of beer she needed to put down while she worked. She carefully concealed it, “Tell me if you see any cops”, she said, “I’m not meant to be drinking this.” Oh, ok was my slightly startled response. Salvation was truly a blessing, energetically and effectively working on the end of a shovel, meticulous to make sure everything was done thoroughly and well. Salvation regaled us with stories of her Grandmother back in the islands that she used to do this with. She expressed utter delight at the layers of compost breaking down that were revealed as the wooden slats were removed. She wanted her photo taken with us, in situ, with the worms and skinks in shot. Once we’d finished she departed, can of beer in hand, thanking us for the chance to help. Funnily enough I heard reports later that Salvation was known to be quite difficult to engage with. I also heard tell that Salvation had loose boundaries especially when it came to around ownership. Salvation, eh, not as you’d expect but quite a revelation!

Exclusion, inclusion, distrust and dislike are themes in today’s gospel. You see Jesus and the disciples are traversing enemy territory, “the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon where prudent Israelites do not walk alone. Racial stereotypes and bigotry inform ... encounters between Israelites and Canaanites. The disciples walk with full attention, informed by the stories of animosity and violence. “Have you ever experienced this,

¹ Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013, 343

perhaps even locally? “Then one of them, a resident of this alien territory shouts at Jesus. These are not the expected shouts of bigotry that characterise the relationship of mutual disdain. Instead this is the earnest plea of a mother. ... Again and again she violates boundaries, boundaries set up because of ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender and demon possession. She must even contend with Jesus’ reluctance to violate the ethnic boundary, but contend she does.”²

The Jesus we meet is not as we expect, the woman he meets is not as Jesus expected. The style of repartee is quite in keeping with bigotry across a divide of animosity and distrust and Jesus is nothing if not one of a tribe in his place and time (despite our later iterations.) Time and again Jesus rebuffs this woman yet she remains, insists, contends, not for herself, note, but for her child. She takes all that Jesus says to her. She does not deny the boundaries that Jesus enumerates. She speaks to and through them. In fact she doesn’t ask Jesus to change his attitudes or step away from his single focused mission. Rather she is the one who reveals, opens him to see the generous capacity of divine inclusion.

A week or so ago at the Compost Hub first birthday party there was an interesting interplay between people who occupy the inner city yet don’t usually share it socially with one another in a common space. As we were setting up a group of young people who we’d probably cast as street whanau, cheerfully, if a little wobbly appeared around the corner of Federal St, coming up Wellesley Street from the Queen Street direction. Each of them bearing one or more container of alcoholic brew in one form or another, with tide lines well out. Upon discovering there was to be food and a celebration they decided to stop. They draped themselves variously across nearby seating, chatting and watching as set up was completed. Sam then collected everyone’s attention. By this stage there was a greater variety of people, home bound workers, city council representatives, neighbours and even a tourist. Sam asked who would bless the food. After a pause, someone’s name was called out. From the midst of this cheerful, draped on seating group a young irawhiti stood up.

² Ibid, 359

Slight framed, delicately built, bottle placed down, skimpy shorts adjusted, tank top straightened, hair from the long blond wig flicked back then carefully straightened. A poised stance was taken then with quiet elegance a prayer of thanksgiving in te reo was recited, small gold crucifix glinting. A place was given, mana attributed, in shadow of St Matthew's a blessing bestowed upon those of us gathered. The one who blessed our kai was not as expected.

Prejudice, boundaries, insiders, outsiders and outcasts, barriers in us we project outward to preserve identity and keep us safe in our tribe. These are things I hear our texts speak to us today. They speak of the way we are. Perhaps this is what it is to be human. We may desire to change, to be changed and the foolishness of a faith story of incarnation tells us we can be otherwise. But maybe first we need to acknowledge that our actions do not always align our faith, which calls us to act rightly and justly, and to experience the discomfort of such self-revelation. For a just and righteous response Isaiah calls for, demands we look deeply into the inner workings of our minds and hearts to identify and dismantle those internal mechanisms that cause us to demean and dismiss others, the means by which we create foreigners and outcasts.

St Matthew's location positions us cheek by jowl with those who experience themselves as outcasts in their own land. And in the inner city with many who are new in this land, whose language and customs make them foreigners here. In this time of transition and change as this community discerns its way forward, perhaps we might listen for the voices, the calling out cries from outside St Matthew's demographic boundary. They might well disrupt our habits of exclusion and yet reveal the abundant hospitality of divine inclusion and free us to live more fully as the people of God for and in our world.