### “I Will Gather Others” Steve Finlan for The First Church, August 20, 2023

**Isaiah 56:1, 3, 6–8**

1Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. . . 3Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people. . .”

6 The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold 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 my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. 8 Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

**Matthew 15:10–20**

10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: 11it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” 12Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?” 13He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. . .” 15But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Welcome to First Church. No one is a foreigner here; all are welcome. Today’s Bible passages are both linked to the relationships among people, and reveal how we treat others reflects our innermost thoughts. Isaiah of Babylon looks at how people react to foreigners, while Jesus looks at the whole idea of religious defilement or impurity, which has implications for how we treat others.

Let’s start with Isaiah of Babylon. He is speaking compassionately when he says that foreigners who join themselves to the Lord should not feel they are apart from the people of God, but should feel that they belong. Their prayers and offerings do matter, and God enfolds them in with his people. For the temple “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7), something that Jesus later quoted and affirmed at the time when he drove the money-changers out of the temple.

Jesus spoke not just of a “house of prayer” as Matthew and Luke have it (Matt 21:13; Luke 19:46), but of a “house of prayer for all peoples,” as Mark correctly quotes him (Mark 11:17). The Isaiah passage further lets you know that other nations are intended, when it says that God “will gather others to them,” besides “the outcasts of Israel” (56:8). An international fellowship is intended. Outsiders become insiders for, with God’s love, barriers to understanding are removed. “These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer” (56:7). New and peaceful relations between Jews and foreigners will come with joy and shared worship. When there is this kind of fellowship, it will seem a like a new world. This is a vision from Isaiah that was offered for the Jews recently returning to Judah from the Babylonian exile. The prophet wants them to be open to worshiping with Gentiles, and to understanding everyone to be part of God’s family. This was a radical idea.

To understand the gospel passage we have to understand the concept of defilement or impurity. It was the idea of an invisible or metaphysical stain that could besmirch a person, and which needed to be cleansed. There were foods, objects, and foreign people who were believed to transmit this perceived impurity, and there were techniques for cleansing impurity. We call this a ritual purity system, and it was promoted by the Pharisees and culturally understood in Judaea.

Now, Jesus is rejecting the anxiety about ritual or outward defilement, and putting all the focus on spiritual or inward defilement. A large part of the ritual system of the Pharisees included anxiety about defilement from contact with foreigners, so part of Jesus’ critique is a critique of the exclusion of foreigners. Jesus is here rejecting the whole symbolic purity system, and, by implication, its hostility to other nationalities. He says there’s no such thing as defilement from the outside, but only from the inside, from evil motives and thoughts.

It’s not substances or impure people who cause defilement, but evil intentions that are held in the heart. Jesus’ statement is a radical and completely spiritualizing interpretation of purity. For the Pharisees to switch to this value system, they would have had to abandon their whole daily routine, their constant vigilance regarding ritual purity. They would also have to drop their feelings of disgust toward foreigners. So there is a moral heart to Jesus’ rejection of ritual purity concerns.

And it is interesting to note that Jesus says this to “the crowd” (15:10). He wants everybody to “listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (15:10–11). He is, in effect, telling them to learn to think spiritually. Don’t fuss with ritual purity, but give value to right and wrong, to honesty, fairness, and marital fidelity. Take seriously what issues from your heart and comes out of your mouth. The issues of the heart are what matter. They lead not only to speech but to actions, and the moral weight of these actions is crucial.

There are things that are spiritually *weighty*, that is, meaningful and important. In another passage in Matthew, he refers to “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt 23:23). Justice or fairness is one of the weighty matters of the law. God wants to see people treated fairly, and not to see wealth or fame allow people to get away with crimes. Will the justice system be run by laws, or by popularity contests and influence?

Mercy is another one of the weighty matters. That involves large-heartedness, compassion, and love itself. God shows mercy because God loves. Mercy is one of the gifts of God. God wants *us* to reflect that mercy back to others.

And faith is a weighty or crucial aspect of the law of God, not a written law, but a spiritual law written into the nature of the universe. Trusting God is a healthy spiritual reaction for any creature. “Faith” stands for each individual’s walk with God, so it existed in the Old Testament as well, and that is why Jesus can affirm its presence there. The “weightier matters” quote is probably based on Micah 6:8: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” That last ingredient, walking humbly with God, is summarized as “faith” by Jesus.

So, if believers live by honest faith, and are not led astray by personal desire, fear, or hostility, they will develop a relationship with God that will bear healthy fruits in their lives. What comes out of such a person’s heart will be spiritually fruitful. It’s up to each individual to cultivate their relationship with God, and to let faith function. Faith is the word that sums up your experience of walking with God. Faith is the word for your daily walk with Jesus, as you open your heart to allow God’s love to enter. Then the things that come out of your heart will be good, and the spiritual fruits will be everlasting.