

ALL ARE WELCOME

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Matthew 15:10-28; Romans 11:1-32; Isaiah 56:1-8

When Jesus sent the 12 disciples out on their first mission, he told them that they were to go nowhere among the Gentiles, nor enter any town of the Samaritans. Instead, they were to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As far as Jesus was concerned, he had been commissioned by God to reform and save the house of Israel. Consequently, up to this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has concentrated on proclaiming the good news of God's reign to the people of Galilee and healing every disease and every sickness among his own people. Only once prior to our gospel lesson for today did Jesus respond to a Gentile when he healed the servant of a Roman centurion. Otherwise, Jesus perceived that his primary calling was to challenge the legalism of the religious leaders of his day, and liberate his people from all of the ways that they were being held captive to the law of the Pharisees and the scribes.

This mission of Jesus already had given the religious leaders just cause to begin conspiring and figuring out how to destroy Jesus. However, once his cousin, John the Baptist, was put to death, Jesus intensified his critique of the religious leaders, called them hypocrites and blind guides, and accused them of teaching human precepts as doctrines while their people were suffering from all kinds of poverty, corruption, oppression, and violence. When the Pharisees and the scribes complained to Jesus that his disciples were breaking the tradition of the elders by neglecting to wash their hands before they ate, Jesus explained to the crowd that neglecting such superficial rituals does not defile a person. What defiles a person are the evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander that emanate from the heart, and harm other people.

At this point in his ministry, Jesus figured out that he probably has offended the religious leaders enough. Therefore, he leaves Galilee and heads north to Tyre and Sidon where he hopes to get a reprieve from this tension with the Pharisees and the scribes. There a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus and begs him to have mercy on her and heal her daughter. When Jesus finally responds to the woman, he tells her that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. However, God uses this woman to remind Jesus that no matter whether a person is a Jew or a Gentile, every human being is worthy of God's mercy. Recognizing the trust that this woman has put in him to cast this demon out of her daughter, Jesus immediately heals the young girl, and mercifully saves her from her suffering.

All three of our lessons for today emphasize that God's salvation—be it in the form of restored health, liberation from oppression, the forgiveness of sins, or renewed right relationships—God's salvation is meant for all people. Even though God has made a covenant with the children of Israel and has chosen them to be a light to the nations, according to the prophet Isaiah, foreigners also will be accepted by God and benefit from God's saving grace as long as they love the name of God, serve God, and keep the Sabbath, including all of the sabbatical practices that were intended by God to maintain justice and peace throughout the land.

Likewise, according to the Apostle Paul, even though Paul originally thought that he was being sent to the house of Israel, he now understands that he also is called to proclaim the good news of God's saving grace to the Gentiles. This shift in focus does not mean that God has rejected the chosen people of Israel. Instead, this shift for Paul simply indicates that God's mercy is intended for all people, Jew and Gentile alike. Just as all Israel would be saved by God's promise of forgiveness, so also every Gentile would benefit from this gracious and merciful gift of God. Since every human being is disobedient to God and does what is evil in the sight of God, every person is eligible to receive God's merciful forgiveness.

How does this message of inclusiveness translate to those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ today? We who have been baptized into the death of Christ and raised again to new life are called to let our light so shine before others so that other people will see the good that we do and give glory to God. By virtue of our baptism, we have been chosen for this purpose just as the children of Israel were chosen for this purpose—to join with God, to love the name of God, to serve God, to hold fast to God's covenant with us, to do what is right, to maintain God's justice, and to keep the Sabbath, including all of the sabbatical practices that were intended to bring about the liberation and salvation of all peoples on the face of this Earth.

Instead, what do we do? Like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, the church often spends too much time and energy developing human precepts as confessions and doctrines, determining the correct procedures for worship and the administration of the sacraments, arguing over the right interpretation of scripture, and establishing social statements that are more words than actions. Consequently, we end up neglecting the very thing for which we have been created, called and chosen to do—to love God with our entire being and to love all of our neighbors as we ourselves have been loved so graciously by God.

Sometimes people within the church can get so concerned about what might defile us that we end up creating all kinds of rituals, expectations, and barriers that tend to exclude others from our household of faith, or we develop great walls of hostility within our own household of faith that divide us one from another. Instead of doing what is right to relieve the suffering of people in the world who are suffering from all kinds of evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness and slander by others, we tend to spend much of our time and energy trying to figure out how to get those who are unchurched into our household of faith so that they will make the right confessions, believe the right doctrines, participate in the right rituals, and join with the right people.

None of these human precepts, constructs or endeavors will save us or anyone else for that matter. Only by God's grace and mercy will any of us be saved—a God who loves us without measure, who accepts us for who we are, who gives us instructions about how to be in right relationships with God and with one another, who calls us to account for when we do wrong and forgives us all of our sins, and who continually reveals to us the way of justice and peace in this world that eventually will save this world from human destruction. However, given our human pride, greed, and fear that causes us to break this covenant that God has made with us in our baptism and that causes us to disobey God in so many dimensions of our lives, all that we can do is call upon the mercy of God to forgive us, and then recommit our lives to what will unite us as one people in the realm of God.

Today, we come to this table to share in this holy meal that we have been given by Jesus in order to set us free from our sins, and to untie us as one people of God. Where once we were taught that this meal was meant solely for Lutherans, we now know otherwise. This meal is intended for any and all who desire to be liberated from the evil intentions of their hearts and from all of the ways that we daily violate God's commandments. Just as we all are one in our disobedience to God, we all are eligible to be recipients of God's mercy in and through this holy meal. As we eat and drink together, we are joined together with God by Jesus Christ as one people in the salvation that God desires for all flesh.

Here is where we all may receive God's merciful salvation, so that we all may be set free to love God with our entire being, and to serve God with our whole life by holding fast to God's covenant with us, keeping all of the sabbatical practices that God desires, maintaining the justice that God requires, and doing what is right according to the inspiration and motivation of God's Spirit. No matter whether

you are a member of this household of faith or someone who is foreign to the traditions of our ways, you have a right to receive God's gracious mercy. Therefore, come, eat and drink at Jesus' table, and you will be saved from everything that has ever or will ever defile you. Don't take my word for it, but put your trust in Jesus, and the peace of God that goes beyond all of our human understanding will be yours forevermore. Amen.