

“God’s People”
Isaiah 42:1-10; Acts 15:6-11;
Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 22:1-13

September 23, 2018
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

This past month we have been doing two things. We have been thinking about the story of our lives, and we have been using these discernment ideas that we came up with as a congregation a couple of years ago. We are on a journey together through life and we have these ways that we found incredibly important to us. For the last four weeks we have been talking about the nature of God and God’s faithfulness and our ability to trust in God. We talked about the characters in the story—us and God—and how God is so trustworthy.

Any story has a plot line to it and there comes a point where some tensions arise. So as we begin to think about what it means to be a people together as the body of Christ, where does the tension point begin to show up?

It’s interesting to me that early on in our lives we begin to create groups. Anybody who has gone through middle school and high school probably recognizes that there are certain cliques that happen and these groups take form and shape. What’s interesting to me is that it’s not just junior high and high school where we start to form these groups—an “in group” and an “out group.” It happens in all kinds of ways, and it seems to continue to happen throughout our lives. We can have in groups based on all kinds of things. We might have the people who went to college and the people who didn’t. The struggle with having these groups is that it can divide us.

There was a story about this family who was being divided by our political situation today. One of the people in the family wanted to talk about it. So she said, “Tell me why you didn’t like Obama. Was it this policy? Was it that policy?” They hemmed and hawed and said, “Well, it wasn’t the best, but it wasn’t that bad.” Finally she asked, “Was it because he was black?” All of a sudden there was silence and tension. What it shows, again, is how we continue to create these divisions among us.

There are a lot of reasons why we might not like this or that politician. We might disagree with a policy. But if we a priori decide that a group of people can’t be trusted or can’t be good people, if we decide before we know them, if we decide by some marker like race or privilege, in a way we’re still junior high folks creating our groups. But this is dead serious. If we look back at the history of our nation, whenever a new immigrant group came in, they were at the bottom of the pile. It was a way of fracturing us as a people.

There are moments where these little disagreements are not that big a deal. Some of you might like the University of Idaho and some of you might like WSU. Some people may not like Boise State very well. We get into our groups. But those are minor things. If we think about what was happening in World War II, there were in groups and out groups. There was a group that came to power that was able to make it so that their

group was the only group. They began to exterminate groups they didn't like: the Roma, the Jews, the homosexuals, the Catholics, and eventually almost anyone who didn't like what Hitler said. These offenders would end up in a concentration camp and would perhaps die. Nazism exposed a time and a way that we can become so fractured that we can become violent over our fractured states.

There are also stories from the same period of time of somebody like Nicholas Winton, who was on his way to a ski holiday in Switzerland when a friend called him and said, "I need you in Prague, and don't bring your skis." He went to Prague. They realized that Czechoslovakia in 1939 was about to be overrun and they decided that they needed to get the children out, particularly Jewish children. So Winton and his friends worked to get visas, transportation, entry visas, and homes for them to go to. He got 669 children moved. He had 250 more on a train when the Germans came in. We know of no further record of any of those 250 children. Just as an addendum to that story, after the war he had a scrapbook from that time. He put it in the attic; he got married. He didn't tell his wife. One day his wife went up to the attic and found the scrapbook, and found out what he had done. So it became something that was known. There is a photograph of Winton with the children who had now grown up. They called themselves "Winton's Children" because he had saved them and they had been able to have a life because of him.

It's easy to see our ability to bifurcate, to see who's in and who's out, to see who's on the right side of the tracks and who's not. If we look back at something like World War II and Hitler's rise, we can see the dangers in that. We can also do the opposite, as Winton did, and work to mitigate the danger.

So what do these scripture verses that I picked out today have to do with that? When Jesus was inviting the little children, the struggle was that the disciples saw them as outsiders. The little children didn't need to come to Jesus. They weren't worthy of coming to Jesus. When we make insiders and outsiders, we so often say the insiders are the ones who are worthy; the outsiders are somehow unworthy. The children were the ones who were unworthy. They weren't worthy of taking up Jesus' time, at least in the disciples minds. But Jesus said otherwise. It's interesting for me to hear that and to see that Jesus said, "I want these outsiders, I want these children; I want these people, these little ones who really were the most vulnerable in their society." One commentator I was looking at said that at that time, 30% of children died in childbirth. Of those who lived, another 30% died by the time they were six, and of the children that were left, another 30% died by the time they were 16. This was a tough time. Jesus wanted to bless those children, those most vulnerable ones among them.

It's an instance of Jesus showing us the way he wants to break the boundaries, break our in group/out group tendency, and invite us, in a way, to become like that out group, to recognize our own vulnerability, to recognize our own inability to know fully, like children, and yet perhaps to be wide-eyed with enthusiasm.

The other story Jesus tells is about a king giving a banquet for his son, and he says, “This is like the Kingdom of Heaven.” Somehow, all the people who are important and who would expect to be invited take it lightly. Really, when they take it lightly like that, they are shaming the king. They are saying he’s not worth their time. And who gets to come? The people from the crossroads. The word for that is best translated “crossroads” or even “public square.” Jesus breaks the boundaries and invites everybody to come.

So as we think about who we are, as we recognize those tensions and we hear those words from Isaiah that say we’re supposed to be a light to the nations, I have to think about what kind of light we are. Are we a people, are we followers who are light in a way that enables all the children to come? I find it’s so easy to be like the Jews of Jesus’ day and begin to say, “This is my group and everybody else are gentiles. I don’t have to worry about any of them.” The question is, who are the gentiles in your life? How do we recognize the boundaries we are creating?

The early church learned, at least a couple of the spokespeople for it recognized, that God is not partial. Paul says that in Romans, and then in Galatians he says, “There is no Jew or Greek; there is no slave or free; there is no male or female.” He picked three major ways we try to separate ourselves— ethnicity, economics, and gender. He invites us instead to recognize that we’re all children of God, and if we’re going to be his light, to think about who we have made a gentile in our lives and how we can change that.

What does it mean to change the gentile? One thing I think it means is just to think of them as human, not less than human. So often it’s easy to take someone who is not in my group and think, “Their needs are less than mine or my group’s. Their needs aren’t as important.” We all are God’s children and all have needs that are important. It’s struggling to figure out how to address all our needs together. But what we see from Jesus is that we’re not supposed to create the boundaries. Instead, when he talks about togetherness, it’s letting all the children come.

Some people talked about Christianity in a way where they say there’s a boundary and on one side are Christians and on the other side are non-Christians. For me, that’s a way of looking back and trying to see where I’ve come from. There’s another way of thinking about it. It’s a way of thinking about following Jesus. Jesus is before me. I don’t know if there are any boundaries back there. I don’t see Jesus putting up boundaries to keep us from coming in or going forward. In following Jesus, there are no boundaries. If I look back at all, it’s to invite everybody else to come. But we live in a world that doesn’t always want everyone, that fractures and defines. We are invited to take the challenge of following Jesus as those who invite all the children, to see how I might be in my own life creating the gentile. As we noted several times in Sunday School today, Jesus says that very hard thing—learn to love our enemies.

Jesus invites all the children to come, and I am so thankful he did because he invites you and me. And it doesn’t stop there. He invites all of us. Amen.