

*A God's Eye View of You, Pt. 2*  
***Don't Say That Anymore!***  
*Isaiah 56: 1-8*

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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We've started a series called *A God's Eye View: Of You!* Each week we're opening the treasure trove of identity statements found in the book of Isaiah. Last week, we saw how the LORD I Am desires to interact with us. He invites us to come to him to fill our hunger as only he can. He beckons us to leave off trying to solve our lives ourselves and return to him for mercy and pardon. Today we will reckon with the reality that learning to see ourselves as God sees us is not always easy. Grace may be free, but learning to live in the grace of God takes a lot of hard, determined work.

In Isaiah 56, the LORD addresses two kinds of people who were in the midst of the Israelite community. 1) *Foreigners*: those who were not born ethnically Hebrew and yet lived and worked and worshipped among the native covenant people. 2) *Eunuchs*: men who had been castrated, either by accident or intentionally, in order that they might serve safely overseeing harems or working in a sultan's court. Both types would be tempted to say, "I don't count among the LORD's people. I'm not sure he accepts me. I don't think the future looks good for me." And to both groups the LORD said, "Don't say that anymore! Don't think about yourself that way! You are more, much more, than this diminished picture of yourself." And to the whole congregation of faith in the LORD, he said, "And you, my people, don't let them say such things about themselves. Don't let the eunuch say he is but a dry tree with no future. Don't let the foreigner feel that I will separate him. My people, don't let anyone feel that way. Remind them of the identity I have for all of you." So the question I'll be asking you to reply to after the sermon is this: "In what ways can we help others say No to old identities?"

Let's look more closely at the diminished identity under which these people lived. The foreigners feared, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people." Many of us may feel as if God has excluded us from the inner circle of faith. Spiritual practices don't seem to work for us. Worship can leave us cold. There seems to be some secret about Christian faith that we weren't told. We may feel as if we are always playing a game, one move ahead of being found out. Everyone seems to know the rules, but we worry that if questioned we will have to admit that we haven't got a clue. As long as the hands aren't called, we can keep playing. But there is a gnawing fear that we don't know what we are doing, with God or even with life. The people who were not ethnic

Israel feared that in the end, God would say No to them.

Thankfully today we do not find many officially created eunuchs. It seems a weird category even to bring up. Yet, there are many of us who feel what the eunuchs of Isaiah 56 felt: "I am just a dry tree." A couple longs for children and cannot have them. They wilt inside when they watch the families gamboling happily across the park. Some long to marry and never do. They do not understand how some people easily stumble into love while for all their effort they cannot make a relationship last, nor turn the corner into intimacy. As the years pass, they may feel their joy drying up. More and more they are turning an envious, mean eye toward others. Life withers and they are trapped in arid souls.

Others feel certain there is something they are to do with their lives, something they are to express, some way they are to help the world. But they can't seem to find it. They feel stymied. Their jobs do not call forth their spirits. The soul-well begins to dry up.

Any of us may look back over our years and wonder that they haven't been more fruitful. We've worked hard, tried our best in our relationships, served the church faithfully, yet seem to have nothing to show for it. We've made few lasting connections and our presence in the world seems to have made no real difference.

How did we ever get to be such eunuchs? The reasons are many:

- Some have been harmed so long ago that they scarcely remember it, though since that time, they have been dried up.
- On the most basic level, sexual abuse of a child can freeze the person all through adulthood.
- Just as effectively, a barrage of hurtful words through the years can cut off the soul from the waking, living person. Life is so hazardous that for protection the heart is sealed off.

For these, the soul has withdrawn so deeply that it provides no nourishment for daily activity. The ensuing depression is the driest of dry trees. Gallons and gallons of water still don't reach its parched roots.

The world makes eunuchs of those who must make a living at jobs so repetitive and deadening that all creativity and capacity for joy is cut off. They work with no sight of the sky or sun. They are cut off from the green earth. And so there is often no spiritual impulse left except the longing for the oblivion of alcohol or hours of television.

But of course we are not only victims. We make ourselves spiritual eunuchs whenever we pursue a course of living that we know is not right for us, but we want anyway. For instance:

- We may cut off our hearts from the rest of life when we follow a prestigious marriage without love, just to keep our place in the world.
- Many people follow the path of striving to get the world's goods and the thrill of power, not knowing they are losing their souls until much later.
- Some essential spiritual life is blocked off when we pursue our sensual indulgences and never exercise any spiritual discipline.
- We all wither and burn out when we run too hard without resting. As George Herbert wrote, we know well what it is to be "rich and weary."

For dozens of reasons, we may well identify with those who summed up life by saying, "I am separated from the LORD. I am just a dry tree."

What was the way out of the diminishment that these people felt? How could the separated feel brought back in? I'd like to highlight just one characteristic both the foreigners and the eunuchs shared: *they held fast to the LORD's covenant.* (55:4,6). A covenant is a solemn agreement. A binding promise. A greater, more powerful person makes promises to a person or group in need of protection or provision. So these foreigners and eunuchs were scrutinizing the covenants to see if there was any news of welcome to them. To put it in more contemporary terms, they read the Word of God. They searched it out and found where they could be included. They searched, studied, scratched and clawed to discover how God's Word made a way for them.

What could they have found? Let's think about this a moment. In Genesis 12, we read how the Creator of the world and all its people began to focus on one man, Abraham, who would become a family which would become one particular people, Israel, the chosen of God. But when we read the covenant closely, we see that it was never just about Israel. God said to Abraham, "I will bless you and I will make of you a great nation." You're special Abraham. But for a reason: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12: 1-3). The point of forming a special people is to bless the whole earth.

Exodus tells the story of how the LORD led his people out of bondage. On Mt. Sinai, God spoke to them the terms of his covenant. He gave them the ten commandments. But before he named the terms, God named the purpose: "You yourselves have seen...how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you .... will keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession...and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19: 4-6). You're special. But for a purpose. You're priests to the world. You bring my word to them. You bring their prayers to me. You're a

holy nation in order that the world might know who I am.

In the book of I Kings, we read about when the great Jerusalem temple was completed. King David's son, Solomon, offered magnificent prayers of dedication. They included these words, "When a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake...hear...and do all for which the foreigner asks in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you (I Kings 8: 41-43). The temple was always meant to be for more than just Hebrews. It was meant to draw everyone. So our passage today says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is. 55: 7). These very words Jesus quoted in the temple as he cleared it of the merchants and money changers. The plan has always been to gather outcasts, welcome strangers, heal the injured, loose the captives and redeem the sinful.

If we seek the LORD through his Word, we will be welcomed, both by the LORD and the community of his people. The past need no longer control us. God's future will flood our present. Neither what we have done nor what has been done to us need be our leading name. Our defects need not prevent us. What has been skewed in our very souls need not keep us from the God who loves us. No chains placed upon us can hold us back from God's embrace. Not even when we thought we ourselves had clicked the lock and thrown away the key! Rather, the promises of God will shape each day. So we will be free to discover the fulfillment of the plan God has had all along: to extend his love out from his particular people Israel to the entire world.

There is a wonderful story of this redemption worked out in Acts 8. The apostle Phillip had been led by the Spirit along a road in the desert. There he saw a chariot heading away from Jerusalem. In the chariot was a wealthy eunuch from Ethiopia, an official in the court of the queen. He was reading a copy of Isaiah. Phillip went up to the chariot and asked him a leading question, "Do you understand what you're reading?" The eunuch answered him, "How can I, unless someone guides me." So they looked at the Scripture together. The eunuch had been reading from Isaiah 53.

Like a sheep he was led to slaughter,  
And like a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
So he opens not his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.

"Tell me, about whom was Isaiah speaking, himself or someone else?"  
It's not hard to imagine why the Ethiopian eunuch was drawn to this suffering figure. One who had been cut with the knife. A sheep shorn of its wool, then led to be slaughtered. Who just had to take what had been done to him. No matter

the humiliation or injustice of it. He got the knife and his life was taken.

So Phillip “beginning with this Scripture, told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8: 26-40). Jesus experienced being separated from God’s people. On the cross he experienced being cut off from his Father’s presence. He became a curse. His life’s work seemed to have borne no fruit. His whole ministry appeared to come to nothing. Jesus so identified with our lost and forsaken condition, that for a while it appeared as if he himself had been lost. But all the while he was going to the forsaken lands in order to gather exiles and outcasts. On the third day his Father raised him from the dead. And as he rose and ascended, so he carries all who are joined to him to his Father’s throne. In Christ, we are gathered from the deadly places and brought back into life.

As soon as the chariot passed water, the Ethiopian got out and Phillip baptized him. He got immersed into a new identity. He was no longer to think of himself as cut off, or as a dry tree. Now he was grafted into the living Vine of Christ. He was made part of the fruitful, life-giving tree of God’s people.

There are so many wonderful connections for us. People who feel marginalized or compromised or drawn out of favor are called to search the Scriptures and see the truth. Nothing can separate you from the love of God but your own willful refusal. No guilt, no abuse, no damage need keep you. But you’ve got to fight for it. Read the Word. Claim the promises. Rehearse them over and over. And to those who know themselves joined to Christ and part of his people, our mission becomes clear. Learn the Word so well that you can help others find their place in the promises of God. And be those who uphold each other in the straight-talk of honest love. Don’t the one who feels alienated say, “The LORD will separate me.” Tell them, “Don’t say that anymore! You’re in. You belong to Christ.” Don’t let the one who feels like a dry tree stay withered. Tell them, “Don’t say that anymore! Christ lives in you. He will produce fruit through you.” We are called, each and all, to say aloud the promises to each other. The LORD will bring us to his holy mountain. He will make us joyful in his house of prayer He will make our lives count for his glory. He has given us to each other, for he has claimed us together as his own. Don’t let me hear you believe anything else about yourself!

Today for our talk-back, please message in your answers to this question, “In what ways can we help others say No to old identities?”