

**“WELCOME INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD”  
PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“WELCOME INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD”  
Matthew 15:21-28  
August 17, 2008  
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

The media focuses our attention on those deemed to be exceptional - - artists, scientists, entertainers, politicians. But we are surrounded by ordinary people who are involved in significant struggles and facing great challenges.

The prophet Isaiah preached a bold message of inclusiveness. The community of faith in every age tends to think it has a monopoly on truth and right. Isaiah had a great faith that saw God loving all people and hearing their prayers.

Paul, no less than the prophet Isaiah, confounded popular expectations by taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Beset by criticism and persecution, Paul pursued a vision of the kingdom of God beyond all religious, racial, and political divisions.

What Isaiah saw in prospect and Paul saw in retrospect was the radical re-definition of *“the neighbor”* by Jesus. Jesus opened the doors of the kingdom to any person of faith, Jew or Gentile, saint or sinner, healthy or diseased.

We hear people talk a lot about **“thinking outside the box.”** This morning I want to invite us to **“Look outside the circle.”** We may become so accustomed to being around the people we know and understand that we do not look beyond this circle to see other people of worth and promise. Strangers of every kind may be discovered to be God’s children, too.

We live in a world of walls, and every day walls are important to our lives. A wall separates the inside from the outside, indoors from outdoors. Walls give us privacy and protection. At work and at home walls define our personal space. Throughout our lives walls enclose special places, such as a place of worship or a museum or a concert hall. Walls exist for our benefit. They help to keep us human. As with all good things, however, walls can be misused. They can become barriers between people. They can be used to restrict certain areas from certain types of people. Walls exclude as well as enclose. The same walls that protect us can leave someone who needs us out in the cold. The early church had to come to terms with a wall before it could reach out to the world.

All three of our scriptural readings for today deal with the universal aspects of the love of God. Isaiah 56 refers to the time when the Hebrews returned from exile in Babylon and discovered that things had changed. Foreigners were living there! People outside the faith of Israel were calling Jerusalem home! The prophet calls on his people to be open to these strangers and to their inclusion in the worship of God. The irony is that the Hebrews had once been a band of wanderers, whose name likely came from a word meaning “**strangers.**” Now they were to see these new strangers living in Jerusalem sympathetically. Romans, chapter 11 finds Paul distressed by Israel’s rejection of Jesus Christ. He, the “***apostle to the Gentiles,***” knew that Christ had come for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. He grieved that God’s inclusive love in Christ had been rejected by some of his own people.

Our Gospel reading (Matthew 15:21-28) is very strange if we do not understand the larger setting. The early church was rife with conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The question of whether Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming converts to Judaism threatened to destroy the Christian community. Paul, the missionary to the Gentile world, and Peter, who sided with the Jewish-Christian perspective, might never have resolved their differences had a dramatic vision on a rooftop in Joppa not convinced Peter of his error. The early church kept the account, in Matthew 15:21-28, of Jesus healing a Canaanite woman’s daughter as an example of Jesus reaching out to both Jews and Gentiles.

There was a wall in the Jerusalem temple that divided the inner court, which was open only to Jews, from the outer court, which was open to Gentile visitors. The sanctuary of the temple was accessible only to those who were sanctified by membership in the holy race of Israelites. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that there were inscriptions, in Greek and Latin, at regular intervals along this wall. They warned Gentiles not to enter the inner court on penalty of death. Paul took an offering among the churches he visited throughout the Mediterranean world for the mother church in Jerusalem. He did this for two reasons: first, the church in Jerusalem was suffering from privation and persecution; second, Paul knew that a wall was being built in the Jerusalem church. Gifts from fellow Christians, both Jewish and Gentile believers, might deter the building of the wall. It was Paul's return visit to Jerusalem to deliver this offering that led to his final arrest.

In 70 A.D., the city of Jerusalem and its beloved temple were destroyed. The Romans did not leave *“one stone standing on another,”* as Jesus had predicted. (Mt 24:2) Because of the dedication of Paul and Peter, empowered as they were by the Holy Spirit, the wall of separation and exclusion that some were building in the early church was taken down. The church was able to affirm that Christ is the cornerstone of a new temple, Christ's own church, with no dividing walls of hostility or discrimination. Christ himself is the peace that binds all of his followers together as a spiritual *“dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”* (cf. Ephesians 2)

Unfortunately, this dramatic story from the New Testament was not the end of wall building in Christ's church or among Christ's people. God's own architectural design of a temple without walls has been compromised. Twenty centuries later, look at all the walls. We have the institutional walls of denominationalism, sectarianism, factionalism. We still have racist walls and sexist walls and economic walls. These, however, are fairly easy to condemn at the theoretical or ideological level. Much more insidious are the walls we build individually and personally. Congregations tend to become culturally and socially homogeneous, with everyone sharing predictable values and views. Outsiders sense immediately when such congregations have no room for them. Nothing has to be said. But where is there a place for everyone?

The world may not be looking for your church or my church. But the world is looking for a place for everyone. Each of us, sooner or later, needs

such a place. Sometimes the people we like least are the people we need most. Christ's people need to be inclusive because Christ's gospel is inclusive. It is not a matter of building something ideal in order to please God, but the other way around. God is pleased with the loving and inclusive community because there is a place there for every child of God. I need the company of all of the people for whom Christ died. I am no good in isolation. I can't make it on my own. Poet Maya Angelou speaks for each of us. **“Lying, thinking / Last night / How to find my soul a home / Where water is not thirsty / And bread loaf is not stone. / I came up with one thing / And I don't believe I'm wrong / That nobody, / But nobody / Can make it out here alone.”**

We are especially impressed by people who accomplish or experience something for the first time - - the first climber to scale Mt. Everest, the first astronaut to walk on the moon, the first athlete to break the four-minute mile. We admire these people for their great faith, for their ability or willingness to do something that has never been done before. May we have faith to be the first to serve one of God's forgotten children in the spirit of Christ.

I invite you into the fellowship of this congregation. I welcome you into the Kingdom of God. Come grow your spirit with us. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.