

**"Where The Wild Things Are"<sup>1</sup>**  
**Isaiah 56:1-8 (English Standard Version)**  
**Irresistible – Can the World Live Without Us?**  
**September 17, 2006**

Turn with me in your Scriptures to the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, which is somewhere near the middle of your Bibles. We also have some sermon notes which have this ancient message from God that he planned before the beginning of time for this particular group of people in Watkinsville, Georgia to hear this morning (which is just mind-blowing if you think about the fact that before anything was, God knew everything that would be going in your world this morning and has custom-fit these words for your life). The message of Isaiah is pretty simple: who will you trust when everything around you is broken and ruined? When the things you've always looked to for significance and security are pulled out from underneath you or you make decisions in life that totally screw up your world, what will you cling to so you don't drift off in despair?

For us, Isaiah's message and particular this summary of the first 55 chapters of this prophecy that we encounter here at the beginning of chapter 56, have a specific focus. We've spent the last four weeks remembering and discovering what it means for us, as a church, to live as a community for the community. The past three weeks we've focused on the reality of the gospel, the breaking-in of the power of God into our world in the person and work of Jesus to redeem and renew everything. Short version – life in all its fullness is found in Jesus, not in ourselves or anything else in this world. When we become a people who have been captured by the gospel, we set aside our natural propensity for self and give our lives away to God, each other and the world. In other words, gospel people become a community for the community around them.

Here in Isaiah 56, we need to see God paint this picture of what community really looks like. What should our life together as Jesus people look like – that's the question we're asking as we read 56:1-8 together. So I'm going to pray and ask God to not only show us the blueprints for doing life together, but over and through that our prayer is that God might deepen our connection with Christ here in this room.

*<sup>1</sup> Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. <sup>2</sup> Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil." <sup>3</sup> Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." <sup>4</sup> For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, <sup>5</sup> I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. <sup>6</sup> "And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant - <sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt*

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<sup>1</sup> I am very much indebted to Tim Keller for his insights into this text in a sermon entitled 'Community 2005,' preached during Redeemer Presbyterian Church's Vision Campaign in the fall of 2005. Anything intelligent said in what follows probably comes directly or at least indirectly from men like Keller and Alec Motyer, whose excellent commentary on Isaiah also helped bring this text into focus for me.

*offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."* <sup>8</sup> *The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered."*

How many of us at some point in reading those words went, 'Huh?' I don't know how often you read the Scriptures but if you've ever spent much time in the Old Testament you know how hard it is to connect with some of this stuff. And what happens is that we come to see complex things as irrelevant, choosing instead to only read the New Testament or to ditch the Scriptures altogether and start a blog about your life that three people read and two of those are your mom and sister.

So here's the deal – Isaiah 56 is nothing more than God's vision for you and me and everyone else in the world. It's a rather simple reminder that God has not saved us to live like Obi-Wan Kenobi hiding out on Tatooine (because everything in life can be taken back to Star Wars, you know). God has hard-wired each of us to do life with other people and to live in community – even those of us who are socially retarded and limit our social contact to MySpace or the guy who carries out your groceries at Publix. As we've talked about the gospel and the fact that Jesus saves us and changes us by creating a whole new world of forgiveness and freedom and focus, you and I need to come to grips with the reality that Jesus doesn't come to create a bunch of little individual Christian planets – he's coming to create a new community. Here's what we need to get in front of us this morning – *God saves us as part of a new community*. God's vision for his world is not a collection of disconnected individuals with Jesus as the center of their own isolated world, but his vision is that within his world – within each community – there is a dynamic counterculture created by Jesus where recovering self-addicts do life with each other. If you're here, you were created for community – you need other people and other people need you.

Now I want you to see this from the Scriptures. I need you to see God's vision and dream here for your life – to move from isolation and your own private world to a shared life of community. And as we make our way through these verses, there are three simple questions we need to ask: why? what? how? Why must we live in community? What does biblical community look like? How do we pull this off – how exactly do we move from self to God and others; how do we move from being consumed with what people can give us and get to a place where we begin to give our lives away?

### Why – The Importance of Community

So let's begin by asking why community is so important to God. Look at verse 1 where God says (don't miss that it's God saying this...): 'keep justice and do righteousness,' which is simply a description of what we might call a God-centered life. 'Keeping justice' simply means doing those things which God has judged to be right; 'doing righteousness' is a picture of living in light of God's character. I'm not sure how you would define the Christian life, but here's how God describes it – justice and righteousness.

Now there's a problem here and some of us are feeling it because describing our life with God as something we do sounds off, doesn't it? Because haven't we been very vocal and making a lot of big, sudden movements to the effect that Christianity isn't about what we do but what God does? I thought life was about grace not my performance? So what in the deuce is going on with God telling us to 'keep justice

and do righteousness.' We've been banging the drum saying that Christianity is not about moral conformity, right? You and I are not Christians because of what we do or avoid, but these verses sound like what one pastor described as God's version of 'you better not pout, you better not cry, you better watch out...' So what's up with verse 1?

You need to get this because if you don't get what I'm going to show you, then you will be way off when it comes to Christianity and being way off here has long-term (i.e. eternal) consequences. Keeping justice and doing righteousness is a summary phrase of all the things that God says to do and not do throughout the Scriptures – it's an even shorter version of what we find in the Ten Commandments. Now tell me, why did God give his people the Ten Commandments? Most of us grew up thinking that all these rules were here to keep us on God's good side, right? But if our life with God is about repentance and not moral conformity, then why are the Ten Commandments – why are justice and righteousness – so important? Because God created us for community and has provided us with the pattern of normal life in this new community, summarized in the Ten Commandments and captured in this idea of 'keeping justice and doing righteousness.'

So when you see 'justice and righteousness' in 56:1, think community and think grace. Community is the context for God's work among his people and what he is doing in us and through us is creating a world that displays his values and character.

#### What – The Pattern of Community

Now what exactly does that look like in our world? Check out 56:2-7 and I want you to notice three things: the concept of Sabbath and two groups referred to in these verses as 'eunuchs' and 'foreigners.' Each of those speaks into a particular area of life in which biblical community serves as a radical counterculture to the world in which we live in. Specifically, what we need to see is that God's design for community radically changes the way we think about work and money, sex and family, and race and power. There's enough here to preach a whole sermon on each of those, but here's what I think we need to see this morning.

The idea of Sabbath is a pretty easy concept to grasp – take one day a week and rest from your work. Everyone get that? Not very hard (in theory) to get your hands around. And what you see in the context is that God uses His idea of Sabbath as an example of 'keeping justice and doing righteousness.' Taking one day out of seven to not work is something God says is good and fits within his character. Think about how this concept of Sabbath and resting from our work serves to counter two broken pieces of our world in relationship to work and money. First of all, Sabbath reminds us that work matters – well over three-quarters of our days are to be given to God-honoring labor (and by God-honoring, I don't simply mean that your job is a front for evangelism. Some of us – and I'm speaking from experience here – are convinced that our jobs only matter if we share our faith and we miss the fact that being a bookkeeper and cleaning houses and staying home to take care of snot-filled infants is good and God-honoring because anything you do to make things be or go the way they should be and go in God's original design is good. Does that mean forget evangelism? No. It means that is just a part of what it means to work.). God did not create us to live in a perpetual weekend. He did not create us for vacation or retirement (in the modern sense, at least). He created us to add beauty, value, and truth to his world – he created us to work.

But some of us will take that too far and will never take time to rest. This idea of Sabbath wasn't God's idea for killing a good time but in God's wisdom, placing limits on how much we will work which means we limit how much money we can make is for our good. Sabbath keeps work and money from moving out of the category of 'good' and becoming something we can't live without. Some of us never feel like we get a break and we miss out on opportunities with our families and with friends because we're always working. So don't miss God's goodness to you in setting aside Sundays (or another day if you're working – for me, it's Friday) for you to rest, and by rest I don't mean yard work or home work, nor do I mean simply having 'me-time.' For students, work your tail off during the week and have everything ready for Monday so you can be in church, enjoy the afternoon with friends or take a nap, hooking up with a community group on Sunday night, going out for a late dinner and resting your body and your mind from your studies. Look around you – who else is talking about rest – everything from jobs to youth sports has become more and more time intensive; biblical community works harder than anyone when we're working and sets aside one day a week to rest and be renewed.

What about sex and family? When Isaiah 56 talks about eunuchs, it's talking about a group of people who had been castrated voluntarily in order to gain positions of power and prestige within the royal family. In other words, they were putting career before the possibility of family. Yet what you see here in Isaiah 56 is not only a condemnation of this 'career first' mentality, but perhaps even more strongly, these Scriptures speak directly against our tendency to over-emphasize the place and importance of family. I want to be sensitive to this, but there are a lot of us in this room who don't feel like we were well-cared for as children – maybe Dad was a workaholic and Mom had her own stuff; so we promise to ourselves that we'll never neglect our wife and kids and respond to that with a view of life that puts family at the top of the food chain, maybe behind our personal relationship with Jesus, but certainly ahead of work, school and church. The only problem is that the Scriptures *never* put family ahead of kingdom. Where in the Bible are we ever commanded or allowed to set aside kingdom responsibilities for the sake of our families? This isn't a hard and fast rule that ignores the specific needs of specific days in your family that might keep you from this or that, but what it's speaking into is a pattern of life that makes decisions on the basis of family rather than kingdom. We know this from a number of places in the Scriptures including 56:5 which promises eunuchs that because of their standing with God, their legacy will be far greater than that of sons and daughters. Think of how radical that is in both Isaiah's day and ours in which your reputation in the church is based largely on whether you have children as an adult and how they turn out. And what biblical community does is hold family and sex as a matter of the heart – are you ignoring your family because other things like our careers have far too much of our time and energy? Have we become addicted to our families, allowing a really good thing to become the thing we can't live without? Tough questions...a lot we could say and need to say and think and be honest about; a countercultural view of sex and family is another reason we need each other.

Briefly, the reference in Isaiah 56 to the presence of ethnic foreigners in the kingdom of God reminds us that biblical community serves as a counterculture not only to work and money or sex and family, but to race and power, as well. It's very obvious in this picture that you had different people within God's community – in Isaiah's day, the most obvious difference was the inclusion of different ethnicities among the Jews in the kingdom of God; in our day, that might include race, it might include different socio-economic classes, it might include different generations, and on and on. But what the presence of foreigners should remind us in this room is that biblical

community is a place where our diversity must be embraced. Christianity is about following one Jesus, not one dress code, lingo, style of music, political party, educational choice, learning style and so on. Tell me what is more beautiful – a song in which everyone sings the same note or the song sung in four-point harmony? This is very simple and all of us need to ask God to show us where we need to work this out in our own world – we will be ruthless in our pursuit of one Jesus and we will embrace the different ways in which that pursuit is expressed. Period. We all have our lists of what is acceptable and what is not and this morning it might be that some of us need to hand our list to Jesus and let it go because your list limits the diversity of biblical community.

Now look, before we give up our list, every single one of us will enter an appeals process to make our preferences legitimate, right? As in, there's no way that you can faithfully follow Jesus if...you drink? watch rated-R movies? send your kids to public school? vote Democrat? engage in homosexual behavior? gamble? And there is a point in which our preferences become more than just preferences; there are boundaries to the diversity of God's kingdom which allows and welcomes and invites eunuchs and foreigners to join up with families and church folk; and we've already talked about what those boundaries are in 56:1 with this reference to justice and righteousness. Biblical community is a collection of stylistically diverse people united together by a single hope named Jesus. Biblical community is young and old, hip and square, red and yellow and black and white, conservative and liberal, rich and poor who somehow and someday are sealed and bonded together by a life of justice and righteousness, a life that follows God and mimics God.

#### How – The Power for Community

So how do we do this? How do we live this kind of life together? How do we take just one small step towards community because all of us have a next step – anything from starting new relationships to strengthening old relationships through greater involvement or even confrontation – and whatever that step might be, it's simply too hard for us to pull off, even if we want it really, really bad. I love the picture of what this group of people could be if we lived this way, but it's not going to happen, man. Not with you being who you are and not with me being who I am. We're too stubborn and too self-absorbed.

This is what is so maddening about life – we were created for community yet we live in isolation from each other. We all know what it means to go insane in solitary confinement because there are real and painful gaps in our life together. This is what sin does – it separates and isolates and cuts off. And what we need to hear is not self-help or a motivational speech encouraging us to try harder – what help can be given to eunuchs, what motivation can you provide someone with no ability to do what they want? No, what we need to hear is the promise of God to eunuchs – spiritual eunuchs who have cut ourselves off from community because of our obsession with ourselves and who desperately need to hear God promise you and me in 56:5 that I will not cut you off.

Why? Because Jesus Christ was cut off for us – in Isaiah 53:8, we read that he was 'cut off from the land of the living,' and thousands of years after this prophecy, Jesus hung on a cross and cried out with the pain of every sin, every heartache, every betrayal, every disappointment, every physical and emotional abuse, 'My God, my God, why have you left me and turned from me and run from me?' Jesus voluntarily left the infinite love and community of his Father that he had known for all eternity;

he entered into solitary confinement so that we don't have to; he became nameless so that we might have a name.

Community is the natural response of people who believe this – if who we are is based on someone who gave their life away so that we as his enemies might live, then how can we feel superior to anyone else and exclude them from our lives? If who we are is based on someone who has given us an everlasting name, then how can we avoid community because we don't feel like we stack up? What brings the superior and inferior together into community that you and I and this world so desperately need is Jesus. So my prayer for us is that you might embrace this Christ and the hope he brings of real life together.