

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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August 14, 2005
13th Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 56:1,6-8
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 56:1,6-8
Psalm of the Day: 133-134
Second Lesson: Romans 11:13-15,28-32
Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

We are God's Gathered and Gathering People

I think today, if you didn't pick them up already, I think down in the mailboxes, I believe that's where they are, are the yearbooks from the kids from school from last year. You children here today, when you pick up your yearbook, what is the first thing you look through? What do you start paging through? What do you start looking for? Is it the pictures of your teachers because you miss them from not seeing them over the whole summer? Are you looking to see what they look like? I don't suppose so.

What do you look for? Don't you just page through it to see where the pictures of you are first and then you start looking at everyone else? And even we adults, we say we don't like our picture taken. Those of you that maybe were on either of the floats that we had in the parade last week—I see there are pictures of them down in the basement on the table—if you pick that up and look at it, don't tell me that you aren't looking to see if you look right or if you look goofy or what you look like before you check out the rest of the picture. We are all kind of that way, aren't we? We want to see how we look. We want to be noticed. We want to be appreciated or things like that. We like it when something focuses on us from time to time, don't we?

The Words of God I just read to you from Isaiah then should send a chill up your spine. When he is talking about those he is going to gather in and how he is going to gather still others, do you realize he is talking about you sitting here right now, today? That some 2,700 years ago when he had Isaiah write these words, he was thinking about you. And he was talking about you. What a wonderful thing it is to know that we are God's gathered people and we are God's gathering people, and that he is talking about us and that he is thinking about us as he speaks these words through the pen of the prophet Isaiah.

As you think about how God has you on his heart and in his mind as he speaks these words, as he tells you that you are his gathered people and his gathering people, we see this morning that we are gathered to God because of his righteousness and the things he does. But then we also see that we have the privilege of being the tools that he uses to gather still others unto himself as he speaks about in Isaiah this morning.

Sometimes you look at a picture of yourself and you don't like what you see, right? Sometimes in those yearbooks and those other places you have got a goofy look on your face or things are just out of place and you are kind of embarrassed by what you see. When we look at ourselves by nature, we are more than goofy looking. We are sinful and separated from God. That we know. That we understand. If we are honest

with ourselves, we see what sinners we are and how we have been separated from God—as we have seen already in the book of Isaiah talking about the nations, the peoples, and how this was a foreign concept to the children of Israel.

This whole reading that I just read to you would have been something that would have just seemed strange to them. They were used to thinking of the Gentiles—the non-Jews—as being sinful and separated from God. They didn't always think of themselves clearly as that way. But when God is talking in this text, *This is what the LORD says*, who he is talking to are the foreigners—those outside of the kingdom of Israel. And he talks about doing things to them that just would have sounded strange to the ears of an Israelite.

He says, *“And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.”* Even in the temple itself, the court of the Gentiles, you could only go so far. You couldn't even go to where the Israelites could. Even that taught them that they were different from the Gentiles around them. But now here is God in the second part of his book of Isaiah talking about what the suffering servant was going to do—how he was going to be pierced for transgressions, how he was going to be crushed for iniquities, how the punishment that brought peace to God's people would be on him instead of the punishment on God's people—that it not only applies to the Israelites, but it also applies to the foreigners—to the Gentiles—to all people. To the Israelites that would have been like fingernails on a chalkboard. It wouldn't have sounded right. It would have hurt their ears. But this morning God speaks to those who are not Jewish by race and says maintain justice and do what is right. Why? Why maintain justice and do what is right? Because his righteousness is soon to be revealed and his salvation is close at hand.

The righteousness is going to be revealed. Righteousness—that is a good church word, isn't it? To be righteous means to be right with God. To be right with God means to be perfect and holy—not close, not sort of trying hard, not doing your best, but to be perfect—to be absolutely holy. That's why it is God's righteousness that is going to be revealed because our righteousness doesn't take long to reveal because you and I aren't righteous. You and I sin. You and I are bored with the Word of God at times as though there is something more important in our lives than hearing that our God loves us and died for us and has taken away our sins. At times our sinful nature says, “Yeah, I know that. Tell me something that is going to affect my daily life.” Our sinful nature at times seems to think that this truth—that God has loved us with such an intense love, that he took away our sins—that that just isn't enough—that somehow there needs to be more.

We are sinners who need God's righteousness because our righteousness is nothing but a filthy rag before God. You and I could get bored with the most exciting message in the world and that just speaks volumes to how desperately we need God to be perfect in our place. We need that suffering servant to come and take the punishment for us and to be perfect in our place because you and I just can't do it. We won't do it. We don't even have the ability to do it.

Our God loves us so much that he says HIS salvation and HIS righteousness is revealed, and it is revealed in the suffering servant. It is revealed in Jesus, who lived perfectly in our place, who always loved to worship his Father, who loved the name of the Lord, who worshipped him, who kept the Sabbath, who held fast to the covenant, because we can't. Because as much as the new man inside of us believes God and loves God and wants to do these things, we won't do it perfectly. So Jesus did it perfectly in our place. His perfection is given to us as our own. That is why we can say with a straight face that we believe in the communion of saints. We are a part of the communion of saints, because of who Jesus is and what he has done. His righteousness has brought us so that we can cling to the Father—so that now we can offer to him worship at times as feeble as it is, as half-hearted as it is, and God still accepts it because it is covered by the blood of Jesus Christ.

As that truth sinks into our hearts, as we see it in the Word and as we kneel at his altar and receive his very body and blood that says to us—YOU ARE FORGIVEN, YOU ARE LOVED, YOU ARE MY OWN—then we offer to God worship that is not just our songs of praise in this house, but in our lives. Lives of living for God and serving God as husband or wife, as father or mother, as child or student, as teacher, whatever the case may be—we do our best in serving the Lord, which is a part of our act of worship—our spiritual act of worship.

Why? Because we have been bound to the Lord to serve him, to love his name, to worship him, and we will realize what our God has done so that we are bound to him. And we find great joy in doing this—so much joy that we don't even want to keep it to ourselves. We have been gathered to God by his righteousness. He has done the gathering, but the joy we find in Christ moves us to want to be his instrument so that he can gather others. When he talks about his house being a house of prayer for all nations, that includes us. Then he reminds us, *"I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."* What God uses to gather more people into his kingdom, to bind more people to himself, the only thing he uses is the Gospel. And the Gospel comes to us through the Word and through the Sacraments. I suppose someone can go stay in a hotel room and open a drawer and find a Bible there and they can encounter God's Word without someone speaking it to them and God could bring them to faith, but someone still had to put the Bible there, didn't they? Some Christian had to be moved to action to serve their Lord out of love for their Lord and see to it that the means of grace—the Word and the Sacraments—are there not only for those who already believe to build them up, but to gather still others who do not yet believe. To bring back those who have strayed from the flock. God wants to gather all of those in and he does it through us as we share the Word and as we faithfully use the Sacraments to build ourselves up and to reach out to others. We are God's hand. We are God's voice. We are the reflection of God's love that these people will see. If they see us saying one thing and doing another, they probably aren't going to pay real close attention to anything we say, are they? But as we live and reflect God's love, as we love the name of the Lord, worship him and serve him and find joy in doing so, then we have the opportunity to speak words that flow from the joy that is in our hearts. And others will see it. Others will know that it is not out of obligation or not out of a burdensome law motivation that we do this, but it is because God has touched our

hearts with his love and we want others to know that same kind of joy. We find joy in the privilege that God gathers others through us.

God's love is an amazing thing. It is not finite. It is not as though if you give God's love away to someone else there is less for yourself. God loves each and every one of us in this room and in this world with an absolutely perfect love. The more time we spend in that love, in his Word and in his Sacraments, the more joy we will find in knowing that we are gathered and knowing that we have the privilege of gathering others to the Lord as he does the work as we proclaim the saving message that Jesus lived in our place and died in our place so that our sins are for a certain fact forgiven.