

August 20, 2017 – Isaiah 56:1,6-8 & Matthew 15:21-28

You may or may not be aware that Immanuel is participating in an initiative by the Missouri District called “Plus One.” The idea behind Plus One is that congregations throughout the state would begin one new program to engage their community. Not just to raise money for some charity or start some new ministry for its own members. But to do something to visibly connect with the community around us with the love of Christ.

To be more to those who drive by than just brick walls and steeple and a sign out by the road. But so that the people of Boonville might see the face of Immanuel. Each one of your faces. Doing something that shows that you care about what happens to them. Doing something to love your neighbor, as Jesus commands.

The Missouri District doesn't really care what we do, in particular. They're not trying to tell us how to do ministry in Boonville. They just want us doing something. And they're helping us to figure out what it is that we want to do. They provided a day of seminars and workshops in St Louis. They provided us with a trained coach to help facilitate the process. And with all sorts of other resources.

It's been a good experience so far. But we're still right at the beginning of it. No decisions have been made about anything. We're still just trying to learn about the needs of our community and the potential of our congregation.

But it's underway. And I think it's good that it's underway and that we're participating. Because the Missouri District has rightly identified a very common problem among LCMS congregations and, really, the church as a whole.

We're very good at helping our own. Our own people. Our own families. Our own members. We have lots of good Bible studies... for our own. We have lots of good fellowship opportunities... for our own. We have lots of good worship services... for our own.

But when it comes to helping the community, our attitude tends to be, “Let's pay for someone else to do it.” Let's raise money for Lutheran Family & Children's Services. Let's raise money for Gideons. Let's raise money for Lutheran Hour or LWML.

Now, to a degree, this is OK, because they're very good at what they do. And they can use our financial support. So I'm not saying that giving money to charitable causes is a bad thing.

But when that's ALL we do. When the only thing coming into our four walls is our own members. And the only thing leaving our four walls is a check with the church's name on it. Now we've got a problem.

It's a problem that goes back further than Immanuel Lutheran Church. It goes back further than Lutheranism, or even Christianity. It goes back all the way to the prophet Isaiah. And he talks about it in our Old Testament Lesson today.

Because ancient Israel had the same problem. You see, once upon a time, God had warned Israel about the nations around them. Specifically, the nations of Ammon and Moab. Who had a long history of seducing the Israelites into idolatry. And God had told his people, “You need to separate yourselves from these people. They're dangerous to your faith. Don't let them corrupt you with idolatry.”

But somewhere along the way, Israel decided that they should separate themselves from everyone. That no foreigner should be allowed inside their nation. Certainly not inside their Temple. Nor should they go to any other nation and tell them about the one true God.

No, Israel put a wall around themselves and said, “We are God's people. He has chosen us. We're better than everyone else. You're all a bunch of dogs compared to us. Get out and stay out.”

But a funny thing happened when they did that. They only descended faster into idolatry and corruption. They only drifted further away from God's Law.

You see, it turns out, it's pretty hard to know the love of God without sharing the love of God. And that's the point that Isaiah is making here. "The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.""

The people of Israel had become so convinced that they were special. That they were better than any other nation. That they forgot that, in reality, they were outcasts.

They were a tiny, insignificant nation of rebellious sinners. People who didn't deserve God's love in any way shape or form. And yet, God had continually, repeatedly, faithfully gathered them back into his love. Over and over again.

But they couldn't see that in themselves because they had never seen God do it for anyone else. When foreigners came to join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and be his servants, they said, "Get out! No dogs allowed."

And yet, what they didn't realize was that they were only hurting themselves by this attitude. "These I will bring to my holy mountain... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." God brings them to his holy mountain. God calls his house a house of prayer for all people. God gathers the outcasts of Israel. And God gathers yet others into his people.

God does it. And nothing we do or don't do will ever stop him. And we see him do it yet again in our Gospel lesson. A Canaanite dog. A foreigner rejected by the Jews. A pagan whom the disciples want to send away.

And yet, even in Tyre and Sidon far from the Temple in Jerusalem, God has brought this woman to his house of prayer for all peoples. God has brought her to Jesus. The very house of the Lord in flesh and blood. The Most Holy Place where the presence of God dwells with his people.

A place where she does indeed pray, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David... Lord, help me." She admits to him that she is indeed a dog in his sight. Yet, she has still been brought to the house of the Lord. And she refuses to leave until a crumb falls from his table.

And in that moment, God's salvation came and his deliverance was revealed. Not just to the Canaanite woman. But to Jesus' disciples standing nearby. Jesus knew her faith already. He didn't insult this woman because he honestly wanted to send her away.

He did it so that his disciple would see what it looks like when God calls all nations to himself. He did it so that his disciples would experience what it feels like when God gathers outcasts like this woman – and like themselves – back into his loving arms.

And he did it so that we would see and experience that great mercy as well. Showing us that the mercy of God is not something to be kept inside the four corners of a nation or the four walls of a church. The mercy and love and forgiveness of God is meant to go out for all people.

And when it goes out to all people, it also comes right back to us. Because every one of us comes to God as a dog. Unworthy to receive anything from him. And yet, every one of us is fed the bread of life as children of God. Not a wild dog. Not even a beloved pet. But a part of God's family. Gathered to himself.

And every time we see that happen in someone else, it becomes real for us. More real than it had ever been for the Israelites who rejected Isaiah's message. More real, even, than the disciples watching in awe as Jesus healed a foreigner's daughter. Because what we get to see is not just a miracle of the body. We get to see miracles of the soul.

The miracle of faith. The miracle of those outside these walls being brought in and becoming joyful in God's house of prayer for all nations. The miracle of outcasts becoming family and dogs under the table becoming children sitting at the table. And all of us together feeding on the bread of life. Who, as Isaiah promised, has indeed come for our deliverance and salvation. Amen.