

Perspectives and Reflections Service
August 14, 2018

Remember Who All This Is For

Isaiah 56:1-8

1 Thus says the Lord:

*Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.*

*2 Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,*

*who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.*

3 Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,

*"The Lord will surely separate
me from his people";*

*and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a dry tree."*

4 For thus says the Lord:

*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,*

5 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.*

6 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,
all who keep the sabbath,
and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant —*

*7 these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called
a house of prayer for all peoples.*

*8 Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

I'm gonna begin my remarks this morning with

- A Disclaimer,
- A Confession, and
- A Spoiler Alert

The **Disclaimer** is that I'm pretty sure that circus impresario P.T. Barnum was a dishonest, unethical, cruel, racist who made money exploiting scores of vulnerable people who were at the most extreme margins of nineteenth-century American society.

And, at least according to Google Images, he was nowhere near as pretty as Hugh Jackman.

That's the Disclaimer.

Here's the **Confession**:

I really enjoyed "The Greatest Showman" – Hugh Jackman's highly fictionalized 2017 movie about Barnum and his career.

It's kind of a cheesy musical extravaganza with entertaining choreography, no mention of Barnum's racism or exploitation, and some really good songs.

And there's one particular line in the show-stopping song that comes at the end of "The Greatest Showman" that was worth all the vague historical liberties and omissions.

Now here's the **Spoiler Alert**:

The tension at the center of the movie is about Barnum's desire to transcend his hardscrabble roots and achieve financial success and recognition and approval from New York High Society.

In a telling and decidedly unsubtle quote, Jackman's Barnum says at one point:

“New York Society will never stop from judging
us.

If they did, they'd actually have to do something
legitimate with their lives.”

Subtle.

So that's one part of the movie.

An important and almost certainly fictitious subplot is Barnum's growing admiration and respect and affection for the marginalized persons who are the "Freaks and Oddities" that he displays for audiences at his "American Museum of Curiosities."

Those two themes – Barnum's desire for recognition by New York Society and his affection for his marginalized performers – come together late in the movie when an angry mob burns down Barnum's Museum while he is on the road seeking cultural legitimacy by promoting concerts by famous Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind.

At that point, Barnum comes to his senses, leaves the tour, and comes home to be with his family and circus performer colleagues.

Just in case the earlier plot points had been too subtle and understated, the climactic scene of the movie shows Barnum – whose personal and professional lives are in a shambles – drowning his sorrows in a bar.

Suddenly, General Tom Thumb comes walking up the bar. He's soon joined by the Bearded Lady, the Irish Giant, the Siamese Twins, and all the other members of his troupe of performers from Barnum's American Museum of Curiosities.

Having realized the error of his ways, and recognizing the forgiving faithfulness of his true friends, Jackman's Barnum looks at a photograph of his family and then he sings:

*I drank champagne with kings and queens
The politicians praised my name*

*But those were someone else's dreams
The pitfalls of the man I became
For years and years
I chased their cheers
The crazy speed of always wanting more
But when I stop and see you here
I remember who all this was for.*

I know – that's pretty schmaltzy.

But here's the thing:

That's a great line.

*When I stop and see you here
I remember who all this was for.*

As we gather this morning

- in this place and among these colleagues
- and look toward the beginning of another academic year,

I think it's an ideal time for us all to look around this room and this campus and think together for a few minutes about

"Who all this is for."

Let's begin by directing our attention to the words from Isaiah 56 that we heard earlier.

In the context of the great narrative of the Hebrew scriptures, Isaiah 56 comes as the Israelites have learned that – after decades of exile in Babylon – they will soon be returning to the land from which they had been forcibly removed.

And, not only that, now Isaiah is telling them that when they get there they will be able to rebuild the

Temple that had been destroyed in 587 BCE by Nebuchadnezzar's invading army.

That's where we are as Isaiah 56 begins.

Isaiah is giving instructions to the Israelites as they think about returning to their homeland and rebuilding the Temple.

But in order to understand the significance of Isaiah's words and the context in which they would have been originally read and heard, we first need to hear a couple other – slightly uncomfortable – biblical passages. I want to read you two passages from the Hebrew Bible with which everybody to whom Isaiah was speaking would have been familiar.

Deuteronomy 23:1-3 says

*No one who has been emasculated
by crushing or cutting
may enter the assembly of the LORD.
No one born of a forbidden marriage
nor any of his descendants
may enter the assembly of the LORD,
even down to the tenth generation.
No Ammonite or Moabite
or any of his descendants
may enter the assembly of the LORD,
even down to the tenth generation.*

Leviticus 21:18-20 says

*No man who has any defect may come near:
no man who is blind or lame,
disfigured or deformed;
no man with a crippled foot or hand,
or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed,
or who has any eye defect,
or who has festering or running sores
or damaged testicles.*

These passages – and many others like them throughout the early books of the Old Testament – clearly indicate that there are some people, like foreigners and

eunuchs and people with disabilities, who are simply not welcome in the Temple.

Leviticus and Deuteronomy make it clear that foreigners and eunuchs are clearly not “who all this is for.”

But in Isaiah 56, as the Israelites prepare for and imagine how their life after exile might be, God tells them to

Maintain justice and do what is right.

That’s not really a surprise. God says stuff like that all over the Old Testament.

But then comes a surprise.

Maintain justice and do what is right,

God says, and

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,

*“The Lord will surely separate me
from his people”
and do not let the eunuch say
“I am just a dry tree.”*

Wait a minute, I thought Leviticus and Deuteronomy said that’s exactly what God thinks about foreigners and eunuchs.

But now here in Isaiah 56, God says

*To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
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.*

(By the way: many scholars including former AC

Professor Roy Melugin say that Isaiah absolutely intended that pun: *The eunuchs won’t be cut off.*)

We need to recognize that these words in Isaiah 56 are a jaw-droppingly radical change from the attitude toward foreigners and eunuchs found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

And God keeps going – describing this new situation within the post-exilic covenant community.

*[T]he foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, –
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
...for my house shall be called
a house of prayer for all peoples.*

Again, that's a complete departure from the cut & dried, exclusive and dismissive attitude toward foreigners and eunuchs that we see in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

There's no way around it: this picture of God's community in Isaiah 56 is *bigger* than the one in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

As we follow the narrative

- from the articulation of the holiness laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy
- to the ruminations of the Israelites in Isaiah 56 about how to live faithfully in their life after exile

we see the development of a bigger, more diverse, more inclusive understanding of “who all this is for.”

Over centuries – as they sought to live faithfully together in an increasingly diverse context – the Israelites’ understanding of who belonged in their Temple and in their community grew. It got bigger.

The people who had been welcomed and included for centuries continued to be welcomed and included. None

of them were forced out or told that they no longer belonged.

But Isaiah 56 makes it clear that others who had previously been excluded and dismissed are now welcome and included as well.

That's huge.

Here's why I wanted us to talk about this this morning:

This building, Wynne Chapel, was dedicated on September 15, 1958 – sixty years ago this Fall. We'll have a big celebration at the Homecoming and Family weekend Worship Service on November 11.

And now, as we gather here sixty years later, we're kind of like the Israelites in Isaiah 56: we have a much bigger understanding – on this campus and in this Chapel – of “who all this is for.”

Sixty years ago,

- Austin College had never had a black student or faculty member;
- All students were required to attend two Christian Chapel services in here every week; and
- There were no non-Christian religious organizations on this campus at all.

Six decades later, we have a much bigger, more inclusive, more diverse understanding of

- who is welcome here;
- of who belongs at Austin College;
- and in Wynne Chapel;
- of “who all this is for.”

In the coming months, we will be doing some renovations here in the Chapel. We will take out all these bolted-down pews, replace them with comfortable, portable chairs, and put in a new, durable floor.

And the reason that we are making those changes is because we have a different and bigger understanding of “who all this is for” than we did in 1958.

To be sure, we will continue to do what we’ve always done in here.

Campus events like this one will still be in here,

- and Opening Convocation,
- and the Lessons and Carols Service,
- and the Presbyterian Christmas Eve Service,
- and the All Saints Day and Ash Wednesday masses,
- and the Posey Leadership Award Assembly,

and all the other concerts and recitals and that have been a regular part of the life of Wynne Chapel since its dedication.

We'll continue to host weddings and funerals in here.

And all sorts of summer conference activities.

Wynne Chapel will continue to be for who it has always been for.

But by making a few changes, this can become a more flexible space – a space available to other student groups and other constituents who have previously been overlooked or excluded.

I don't know exactly what else we will be able to do in here. I certainly don't want to dictate that.

But imagine having the Seder Dinner in here, or Masala, or Diwali, or the Eid festival.

Imagine the Kangaraas Dance Team rehearsing and performing on this stage.

Imagine a situation in which this beautiful room doesn't sit empty as much as it does now.

In Isaiah 56:7, God says, "My house will be called a house of Prayer for all peoples."

Our goal in the Chapel renovation is to make this a house of prayer and welcome for all Roos.

Now I don't want you to get too excited – we first need to hire an architect; and the actual renovation won't take place until next summer.

But in the coming weeks and months, as you encounter occasional messes and inconveniences related to our preparation for the Wynne Chapel renovation, I hope you will take the opportunity to remember and reflect upon Austin College's expanding, increasingly hospitable, more inclusive understanding of "who all this is for."

I think what we've figured out in the last 170 years is that we are at our best as an institution when we

remember that “all this” – all that we do here – is for every single, unique, gifted student on this campus.

They’re who all this is for.

We’ve always been good at recognizing that.

And I think we’re getting better and better.