

Sunday October 30, 2022
Lesson 9: Hospitality with Boundaries
Scripture: Ezekiel 47: 21-23

Context:

This fall we continue our series titled “Freedom.” Our last lesson for this unit titled “Justice” looks at how the bible gives us counsel on responding to the vulnerable around us. Today’s scripture lesson comes from the book of Ezekiel and looks at how the wisdom of scripture informs how we care for the strangers among us.

The book of Ezekiel is found in the Old Testament and gives part of the history of Israel through the lens of the prophet Ezekiel. The authorship is attributed to Ezekiel, who was a priest exiled to Babylon with other Judean elite in 597 BCE.¹ The book contains prophecies of what will happen to the people of Judah, as well as visions of restoration between Yahweh and Israel.

The book of Ezekiel is one of the longer prophetic books. Unlike other books of the prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah, it is written in strict chronological order, moving from the prophet’s inaugural vision in 593 BCE and concluding with the vision of a restored Jerusalem in 573.² Given such a timeline, the writer can see the prophet move with a narrative with a vision for the people.

The section for today’s lesson comes towards the end. The order of the book is as follows: the call of the prophet, oracles of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, oracles of restoration including an oracle against Edom and Gog and Magog, and finally a vision of the restored Temple and the return to the land.³ Our scripture passage comes as Ezekiel promised the people they will return home to the land God gave them. Yet as they return, God wants them to be reformed and see the new life to which they are called.

In our piece today, one of the themes presented is the “glory of Yahweh.” This theme was throughout the book of Ezekiel and describes this ancient understanding of God coming to dwell with them just as God did with the tabernacle in Exodus to the Ark of Covenant being with them in First Samuel to the building of the Temple in 1 Kings.⁴ As the people settle back into the land, the “glory of Yahweh” will come as they remember and observe the laws which give all people life. Further descriptions of the land restored in this chapter emphasize this all stems from everything being in its place from the Temple to the tribes being established in their regions again.

For Ezekiel, there is an optimism of how the Promised Land will once again be a place of hope. Those will come home from exile and find a land where once again they can live in peace with those around them. Immigrants, exiles, and the remnant will labor together once again.

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 384.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 385.

⁴ Ibid., 391.

Application

The prophet Ezekiel has never been known for being a prophet of joy and encouragement. Most of the words of the prophet give an image of doom and gloom. Yet these words today paint a more hopeful picture of who Israel will become and the role they will play in bringing peace and stability to the land.

I have come to find the wisdom in scripture often tells us things we know to be true, and yet we complicate them. The same comes in this prescription given to the Israelites. We know welcoming people and encouraging them to labor beside us to receive an inheritance is ideal. We know strangers are people like us, with hopes and dreams, looking for opportunity and belonging. And yet like before, we get in our own way and demonize strangers and completely disregard the scriptural wisdom God gives to us.

I am not just bringing up politics around immigration and nationalization, although this is a place where there certainly is conversation about welcoming the stranger and how to do so. I am bringing up our daily orientation towards strangers in our community in general. How do we see people around us, or even before they come through our church doors or places of community?

Often the primal nature of us is to think poorly of strangers even before we meet them. It begins as a safety precaution, what we tell our children when they are young. We tell them not to talk to strangers and for good reason. There are people who do not mean well to our little ones or those who are vulnerable.

Yet what starts out as a safety precaution can often become a crutch we use in adulthood to not welcome or embrace those around us. If we do not know someone, or who they are connected to biologically, we are often skeptical of them. We must watch them before we welcome or embrace them into our lives.

Time and time again, I see this creep into my own way in which I interact with others daily. I notice my body posture or ways of speaking change depending on if I have a connection to a person. And most likely I make judgment calls about how much I will engage with someone if I “know their people” or I have links which I have deemed important in my mind.

To a degree, there is nothing wrong with such ways of figuring out safe people and relationships. All of us want to have a connecting thread, to be familiar with people who we might think understand where we come from or who we are as a person. We appreciate being able to know people and ourselves in a manner we see fit.

Yet the scriptures today remind us there is also a theology around the stranger and embracing those we do not know as they live around us. They too are to receive opportunities and a chance to inherit resources and property. It does not matter who their parents were or what section in society they have their origins. Everyone deserves an opportunity to come to know God and to be in community with others.

Perhaps this is the message the church needs to hear today especially in the wake of all the splits in society which have trickled down to the church. None of the things we “own” really belong to us. They belong first and foremost to God. Thus, when we think about property battles or leaving historic covenants, we would do well to think about what God has given us to share and to pass onto those after us, whether they are related to us or not. Everything we have in this life is a gift from God to share and leave in a better place for those who come after us.

When the Israelites returned from being in exile, God did not tell them to whole and set themselves apart as a people better than others. Instead, God encouraged them to mingle with

others, to share their resources and to practice the discipline of hospitality. God wanted them to see there was an inheritance for all.

Who are strangers in your area or community? How do you practice the discipline of hospitality to those around you? Why is it dangerous to believe property or land, especially when it comes to churches, belongs exclusively to certain people/groups? Why do you think God wants us to share the inheritance of resources with others? Who is God calling you to welcome as a neighbor today?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009