

Biblical Interpretation as Political Practice, Part Two: Political Bodies Struggling for Inclusion into the Body Politic

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You hammer against the walls of your house... Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go... Knock it out. Duck.

--Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

We live in a world in which the social architecture of functional segregation and inequality persists. Divisions of race, class and gender have become so deep that they threaten the structural integrity of the “House,” whether this is understood in terms of a Church, the nation as a whole, or our entire globalized civilization. The question is whether we have the courage to take down walls that divide—even if they are bearing walls—in order to save the house.

The specter of the American House collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions has long haunted U.S. leaders. “A house divided cannot stand” warned Abraham Lincoln, appropriating the ancient verdict of Jesus (Mk 3:25) to describe the economic, social and political crisis that led to the War Between the States in the 1860s. This historical ultimatum keeps recurring in the American political unconscious:

- invoked by Martin Luther King in his famous August, 1963 speech about racial justice, delivered standing in front of the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC;
- implied in the slogan of the 1992 Los Angeles urban uprising, the largest episode of civil unrest in the U.S. since the Civil War: “No justice, no peace!”;
- confronted again as a global truth with the dramatic collapse of the World Trade Center Towers on Sept 11th, 2001.

A House constructed upon social, economic and/or ideological division will, sooner or later, either cave in because of internal structural flaws or be destroyed by those whose disenfranchisement gives them no reason to feel a stake in its maintenance.

The fact is, there have always been two Americas: not just of rich and poor, but also of *inclusion* and *exclusion*. The America of inclusion has found expression in the ideal of “liberty and justice for all,” and has been embodied whenever Indian treaties were honored, Civil Rights realized, women’s suffrage secured, child labor laws

passed, immigrants embraced, or same-gender marriage legalized. The America of exclusion, on the other hand, was articulated in a Constitution that originally enfranchised only white landed males, and has been embodied in Native genocide, Jim Crow segregation, Gilded Age economic stratification, immigrant exclusion acts, restrictive housing covenants, and the religious Right's current campaign for a Constitutional Amendment to prohibit same-gender marriage.

These two visions of America continually compete for the hearts and minds of our churches. Today Christians are once again lining up on both sides. On one side are those who understand Civil Rights logic as inevitably expansive into *equal* rights for *all* minorities, not just some—the America of Emma Lazarus' "Golden Door," Martin King's "I Have a Dream," and Audre Lorde's "Sister Outsider." On the other are those who believe that justice is a limited good, and that we need to suppress pluralism and restore "purity"—the America of George Bush's imperial politics, CIA rendition flights and James Dobson's "Focus on the Family." Where our churches locate themselves on this political and theological terrain of struggle between those who would tear down dividing walls and those who would shore them up will determine the future of faith—as it did in Nazi Germany.

A curious and troubling conversation between Jesus and his disciples in Mark's gospel toward the end of his ministry is germane. In his dramatic public action in the Temple precinct, Jesus symbolically "loots" those who have looted the poor (Mk 11:15-17). Shortly thereafter his disciples stand, intimidated and fascinated, before the imposing edifice of the Jerusalem Temple exclaiming: "Look, what magnificent structures!" (Mk 13:1). It was indeed an awesome structure, bigger than life, the architectural symbol of their nation. "Do you see these great buildings?" replies Jesus, unimpressed. "There will not be one stone left upon another" (13:2). Talk about deconstruction! Jesus' dictum about the "divided House" turns out to be a trope for the Temple-State! Is it any wonder that the authorities wanted him dead?

"Christ has made us one, having broken down the dividing wall of hostility" wrote the author of Ephesians (Eph 2:15f). The conviction that structures of social segregation had been abolished by Jesus lay at the heart of the earliest church's message. Indeed, the apostle Paul committed his entire ministry to carrying on the related work of building a new foundation of race, class, and gender equality: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; all of you are one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). This New Testament ethos was, of course, eventually abandoned by the Church, which chose to accept Constantine's Faustian bargain. But the vision has resurfaced with every renewal movement throughout our history: among Benedictine monks and Franciscan friars, Anabaptist radicals and Methodist reformers, and in our own time through movements for Civil Rights, women's ordination, lesbian and gay inclusion and immigrant dignity. Its roots, however, are found a half-millennium before Christ, in the proclamation of a disciple of the great Israelite prophet Isaiah.

I. Tearing Down the Walls of God’s House: Third Isaiah and Ecclesial Struggles for Inclusion

Isaiah 56:1-8 is the opening stanza of the prophetic oracle sometimes referred to as “Third Isaiah” (Is 56-66).¹ It sets a tone of radical inclusion, envisioning a time when people from all over the world, including ethnic outsiders and sexual minorities, will be welcomed as full members into God’s House. This thesis is reiterated at the close of Third Isaiah: “The time has come to gather all the nations and tongues” (Is 66:18). This is the “new heaven and new earth” that YHWH intends to bring about (66:22).

Scholars date Third Isaiah sometime in the first two generations of the Israelite exiles’ return from Babylon, between the reconstruction of the Temple (515 BCE) and the time of Nehemiah (ca. 444 BCE). This was a watershed time, and two key issues faced those trying to rebuild their society. One was who was going to *lead* this project, the other was who was going to *participate* in it. Such questions always shape the political landscape, then and now.

Those who had been exiled to Babylon were the elites of Israelite society: priests, managers, the landed aristocracy, scribes, etc. The majority of peasants had remained in Palestine, working the land and scraping out a living, as the poor have always done under any regime. As the elites began to trickle back, they faced a dilemma: how would they re-establish their title and their privileges to land, to social status and to political position? The returnees were a mixed bag indeed, including land speculators and carpetbaggers trying to take economic advantage of the new settlements; priests determined to re-establish the cultic center as their power base; ultra-nationalists who saw a chance to rebuild old dreams of sovereignty; and political front men for Israel’s new Persian imperial rulers who were trying to exert colonial control of the new entity in Palestine. All the elites agreed on one thing, however: *they* would define the reconstruction project.²

Such aspirations generated conflicts with the existing population over property, politics and religion. The most dramatic example was a proposal to rebuild the Temple. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, King Cyrus had decreed that the returning Israelite leadership could reconstruct a Temple in their homeland, but this project was opposed by the *am-ha-aretz* (“people of the land”). Cyrus’ royal successor Darius then halted construction for political reasons, and it took concerted efforts by Israelite elites to get Cyrus’ original promise honored (a drama is narrated in Ezra 1-9). One need only reference the situation of Palestine since 1948

¹ Second (Is 40-55) and Third Isaiah represent the work of prophetic successors to the 8th century Isaiah: the former during the exile to Babylon, the latter during the “reconstruction” period following the return. These writings arose most likely from prophetic “schools,” evidence of which we find in the Elijah/Elisha cycles (e.g. the “company of prophets” in II Kings 4:38). Here disciples carried on the work of their teachers, recontextualizing their word into another historical moment—which is, of course, what all preachers try to do every time we proclaim the Word into a given context.

² For detailed historical social analysis see Clinton Hammock, “Isaiah 56:1-8 and the Redefining of the Restoration of Judean Community,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (Summer, 2000).

to imagine the struggles between the longtime residents on the land and ideologically motivated and politically powerful “returnees.”

The strategy of the elite was to purge the peasantry by establishing new ethnic purity standards. Efforts to shore up the boundaries of nation and family stressed genealogical integrity (which advantaged the scribal class, who kept records of their lineage) and Levitical fidelity (which advantaged the priestly class). The Persian overlords were supportive of such measures: an ethnically uniform colony was easier to manage politically. This explains why the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are concerned with defining insiders and outsiders, and why the people of the land resisted their attempts to assert control.³

Their “reconstructionist” position was legitimated on the basis of Deuteronomy 23:1-8, which specifically excludes “from the assembly” males who were not sexually functional, the “illegitimately” born, and foreigners. (Similar laws are found in Leviticus 21:17-21 and 22:22-24, where sexual blemishes are seen as an indication of impurity.) We might call this the social strategy of “anthropological exclusion”: ruling out persons not because of anything they have *done*, but because of *who they are in their bodies*.

Third Isaiah argues vehemently against this position, taking specific issue with the view that the nation would best be protected through “ethnic cleansing” and endogamy. Instead, Isaiah 56:1-8 calls for the boundaries of the community to be preserved through *ethical* behavior. *Whoever* keeps the Sabbath, the text asserts, is entitled to full inclusion, a point underlined by the most “extreme” examples: eunuchs (heterosexually nonconforming males) and foreigners.

A dramatic opening line that crystallizes the entire argument to follow: “This is what God says: ‘Maintain justice! Do what is right! Then I will vindicate you!’” This makes it clear from the outset that the issue is justice, not purity. Justice is immediately defined as obeying Torah, keeping Sabbath and turning away from evil (Is 56:2). In appealing to Sabbath practice, the prophet is invoking the heart of the ethical tradition of scripture. To keep Sabbath is to make sure everyone has enough and no one has too much, celebrating the gifts of the Creator by keeping both power and goods circulating rather than concentrating (Ex 16:16-19). It calls for vigilance against poverty and social marginalization and for limits to work and accumulation (Deut 15; Ex 23:10-12).⁴

³ The chronological question of which leader came first is a notoriously thorny one, but what is clear is that Nehemiah allowed existing exogamous marriages to stand but forbade future ones, while Ezra took a more conservative position, instructing Judeans who had “married out” to divorce their foreign wives. But if we are tempted to feel morally superior toward such ancient statutes, we should remember that it was not until 1967 that the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a Virginia statute barring whites from marrying nonwhites. This decision overturned similar bans in 15 other states—but Alabama did not remove it from its constitution until 2001!

⁴ See my overview of this tradition in scripture: *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Tell the Word Press, 2001).

But Third Isaiah goes further, addressing a part of the community that is being legally and socially excluded:

Let not the foreigner say...
Let not the eunuch say...
For *this* is what God says... (56:3f)

This verse un-silences the voices of those who have introjected their rejection by the dominant culture because of how they are perceived and publicly caricatured: “The LORD will surely separate me from his people,” and “I am just a dry tree.” Second class citizens in our own history know all too well this self-hatred—black children trying to scrub their skin white, immigrants changing their names, women keeping silent, and gays and lesbians staying deep in a destructive closet—all to avoid the contempt of a society that barely tolerates them. Internalized self-negation and external oppression are like a constant “acid rain,” one black psychologist once put it. And it is time, says Third Isaiah, for it to stop—because YHWH says *differently* (commentators believe the prophet’s rhetoric here implies a new ruling on case law).

The eunuch who holds to the Covenant will receive “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” (56:5).⁵ The prophet knew very well that eunuchs were, according to Levitical strictures, excluded from cultic and family life. After all, since they couldn’t procreate they could not reap the benefits of patrimony, including land ownership. This also meant that their names would be lost to posterity, an ancient way of rendering someone socially and historically invisible. Instead, God promises an honored place in the “House,” something *better* than patrimony, symbolized by a special “monument” and an “everlasting name.” Playfully, the Hebrew word rendered as “monument” in the NRSV is *yd*, usually translated as “hand” (cf Is 57:8), but also as “power,” “place”—or as a euphemism for “penis”!

The only social group lower in the Levitical hierarchy than eunuchs were foreigners, whom the prophet next addresses. He repeats himself: if foreigners follow, serve and

⁵ “Will not be cut off” (Heb *charath*) is a play on the Hebrew word for eunuch (*cariyc*), which comes from an unused root meaning to castrate. The verb firmly links this oracle to the “new thing” YHWH is doing at the end of Second Isaiah: “Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress...it shall be a memorial to the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off” (Is 55:13). Eunuch occurs 42 times in OT, and is translated in the Septuagint as *eunouchos*, meaning “keeper of the bedroom,” designating the role of royal eunuchs as “chamberlains.” There is continuing scholarly debate about whether this term narrowly refers to those who were emasculated to serve as court retainers, or whether it is a broader term including all men who were socially emasculated because of their sexual physiology or orientation. Matthew 19:12 suggests that there are *eunuchoi* made by men, and eunuchs “from birth.” Faris Malik has argued at length from hundreds of ancient sources that this latter designation clearly included homosexuals (www.well.com/user/aquarius/index.htm#Home%202). Frederick Gaiser reads the text this way: “A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1-8 as Case Study,” *Word & World* (14:3, 1994), pp 280ff. See also the work of Nancy Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (Harper-Collins, 1995) and Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Westminster, 1978).

love God, and observe the Sabbath and the Covenant, “I will bring them to my holy mountain, and their sacrifices will be acceptable” (56:6f). The House has been “remodeled” and “repurposed,” in order to be “known as a place where all nations pray.” This is Third Isaiah’s answer to Ezra and Nehemiah’s culture war on those who didn’t fit the ethnic-national ideal: Don’t force sexual minorities out, and let foreigners in. YHWH welcomes *whosoever* desires to follow the Way, regardless of who they are in their somatic identity.

Third Isaiah’s advocacy for faithful Sabbath-keeping over self-righteous gate-keeping is good news today, when gay and lesbian citizens are watching their civil rights erode, while gay and lesbian Christians are having their discipleship dismissed. The prophet shatters the silence that kills, and authorizes attempts to tear down the *bearing* walls that still divide God’s House by groups such as SoulForce (www.soulforce.org).

In Third Isaiah’s view, the Jerusalem Temple was meant to be a world House, not a national shrine (as every other temple in antiquity was). But his vision did not prevail; the ethnocentric strategy of Ezra and Nehemiah carried the day. Indeed, some of those kicked out of the newly proscribed Judean body politic ended up as the despised Samaritans of Jesus’ day. Chauvinism is indeed very powerful. Yet God’s Word did not prove fruitless.

II. “Nothing from outside can make you unclean”: Jesus and Ecclesial Struggles for Inclusion

Dichosa la casa que abriga este dia. Dichosa esta casa que nos posada.
 (“Blessed is the house that today offers protection. Blessed is this house that gives us shelter.”) --from the traditional Mexican litany of “Posadas”

More than four centuries after Third Isaiah, Jesus of Nazareth one day dusted off that Isaiah scroll, looked hard at his synagogue audience, and read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” (Lk 4:18f). When he was done citing Is 61:1f—the heart of Third Isaiah—he added: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). Jesus was announcing a renewed campaign for inclusion rooted *this* prophetic tradition.

Later, in the midst of his cleansing/exorcism of the Jerusalem Temple—the dramatic culmination of his struggle with the Judean authorities—Jesus quotes directly from our text: “My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56:8 = Lk 19:46). It is not overstating the case to say that Jesus staked his entire ministry on the vision of Third Isaiah. Its ethos of radical inclusion animated his constant transgressions of social boundaries: eating with lepers, hanging out with women, touching the impure, teaching the excluded. If Third Isaiah was so formative for Jesus, then, perhaps it ought to also guide us through the well-mined battlefields of our current culture wars.

To strengthen our resolve, we should note that in the often overlooked parabolic teaching of Mk 7:14ff, Jesus spins an argument that is remarkably similar to Third Isaiah's. The literary context finds Jesus having to defend his disciples' practice of sharing table fellowship with "unclean" outsiders (Mk 7:1-5). The set up of the scene contrasts Jesus' proximity to the marginalized poor with that of the Pharisees by comparing their relationship to the town square:

And wherever he went into villages or cities or the countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces (Gk *en tais agorais*) and begged Jesus that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (6:56)

For the Pharisees... do not eat unless they wash their hands diligently... and when they return from the marketplace (Gk *ap' agorās*) do not eat anything unless they ritually purify themselves [or it] (7:3f).

The emphasis on public space, table fellowship and the "politics of touch" makes it clear that this represents yet another prophetic skirmish with the Purity Code.

This is a three-part episode:

- 7:1-5: Pharisees' challenge to Jesus' disciples; explanation of the Purity issues involved;
- 7:6-13: Jesus' counter-attacks Pharisaic authority;
- 7:14-23: Jesus returns to the original issue of meal-sharing, offering a "parable."

The question here is whether the table will be a place where in-group boundaries are maintained or where the social "outsider" may be embraced.

Jesus' disciples' are apparently following his example of ignoring certain purification rites at table (7:2). Washing hands, produce and utensils had nothing to do with hygiene, but with the symbolic removal of impurity (7:3f). These conventions, together with kosher dietary rules, functioned *politically* (defining ethnic identity) and *socially* (who one ate with and what one ate reflected one's status in the class hierarchy). The fact that Mark sets this debate in relation to the "marketplace" also suggests an economic dimension in the background. Pharisaic regulators were concerned that marketplace food had been rendered unclean at some stage (i.e. seed sown on the Sabbath or fruits harvested without properly separating out tithes), and sought to control such "contamination." Many Galilean peasants resented these Pharisaic "middlemen" in the processes of production, distribution and consumption of produce.⁶

The Pharisees are accusing the disciples of group disloyalty *and* defending their own social and economic status as economic and cultural brokers. Moreover, they charge that Jesus' community is ignoring the "tradition of the elders" (7:5). This was a body of legal interpretation that the Pharisees claimed had been handed down orally alongside the written Torah. Jesus refuses to recognize the authority of this

⁶ See my discussion of this in *Binding the Strong Man* (*op cit*), pp. 47ff; 157ff; 217ff.

“human tradition,” contrasting it with the “commandment of God” (7:8f). Not surprisingly, he then appeals to Isaiah to underline his point (Mk 7:6f = Is 29:13). The allusion is germane: Isaiah’s oracle denounces false prophets (Is 29:10) and people who “cannot read” (29:12), and promises that “the wisdom of their wise shall perish” (29:14)!

In a deft bit of casuistry, Jesus moves from defendant to prosecutor by invoking a bit of “case law” (Mk 7:9). He argues in 7:10 that Torah enjoins a responsibility to provide economic support for one’s aging parents (see Ex 20:12) and conversely condemns those who would try to escape this obligation by pronouncing a curse (see Ex 21:17). He accuses the Pharisees of circumventing this obligation by allowing (presumably wealthy) people to will their estates to the Temple, declaring them *korban* (Mk 7:11). Such vows of dedication froze a family’s assets until at death they were released to the Temple treasury, for which they represented an important source of revenue. But because this practice leaves the dependent elderly financially ostracized, the putatively pious “vow” to the Temple becomes in fact an economic “curse” upon the elderly (7:12), and thus “nullifies the command of God” (7:13).

The principle here is the same we see in earlier Markan conflict stories: putting those who are vulnerable before the demands of institutions or the sophistry of the privileged (see especially the sequences in 1:40-3:6 and 5:1-43). Mark is again trying to show that when religion legitimates socio-cultural inequities, it subverts justice. Economic critique lies at the core of these interventions: Mark, who began our episode by linking the Pharisees with the Jerusalem scribes (7:1), later indicts the scribal class and the Temple treasury in systemic exploitation of the poor (12:38-44).⁷

Mark concludes with a signal to the reader to pay careful attention: “Listen to me *all* of you, and understand” (7:14). Jesus’ teaching, characterized in the next verse as a *parable*, is concise and to the point: “There is nothing which goes into a person that can defile; only that which comes out of a person defiles” (7:15). This mysterious trope is immediately decoded for the Twelve in the following household scene (7:17). Using the physical body as a metaphor for the body politic (employed also by Paul in I Cor 12:12ff), Jesus contends that social boundaries constructed by the Purity Code are powerless to protect the integrity of the community: “contamination” can only arise from *within*.

Mark interprets this to mean that Jesus “declared all foods clean” (7:19). Not only does this re-enfranchise marginalized Jews; a kosher diet must no longer function to proscribe table fellowship with non-Jews either! Mark agrees with both Luke (see Acts 10:9-16) and Paul (see Rom 14) that obstacles to building community with ethnic outsiders must be removed—no matter how fundamental to the culture! This extraordinary call is underlined by the ensuing episodes in Mark. First Jesus sacrifices his own Jewish male honor in order to welcome a female foreigner “to the

⁷ See my comments in *ibid*, pp.320ff, 431ff.

table" (Mk 7:24-37). Then the circle of enfranchisement is expanded by the feeding of Gentile multitudes (8:1-9). Mark concludes this narrative sequence with Jesus' warning to his disciples to "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Herodians" (8:15). Social and political exclusivity jeopardizes the "one loaf" around which the church is called to gather (8:16ff). ⁸

Taking a page from Third Isaiah's book, Jesus' teaching concludes that the true "site of purity" is not the *body* but the *heart*, the moral center of a person in Hebrew anthropology (7:18-20). A vice-list follows, alluding in part to the prophet Hosea's denunciation of public crime in Israel: theft, adultery and murder (7:21 = Hos 4:2). Jesus thus re-draws the lines of group identity: the ethnocentricity of the Purity code is replaced by the rigor of collective ethical self-scrutiny.

All groups establish boundaries to determine who is in and who is out. These *can* be moral, such as when they help protect weaker people from domination by stronger people. But while this "defensive" function is usually cited as justification for borders and walls, more often the actual relations of power are the opposite: they function to protect the strong from the weak, defending privilege and maintaining inequality. In what may be at once his most radical and most widely ignored teaching, Jesus rejects *all* culturally proprietary boundaries that allege to protect one's own community from perceived external threats. Scapegoating or excluding outsiders cannot protect us—only our own *ethical* behavior can do that. We should not underestimate how radical Jesus' proposition was for a first century Jew. An analogy for modern North Americans might be re-defining U.S. citizenship not by one's papers, but by one's genuine commitment to the Bill of Rights: an ideology of "open borders"!

Each Advent since 1994, a small group of Christians make a pre-Christmas pilgrimage to the barren landscape of the U.S-Mexico border at San Ysidro/Tijuana. It is a celebration of *posadas*, the traditional liturgy celebrated by Mexican Catholics throughout the American Southwest during the last nine days of Advent. Marchers accompany statues of the Holy Family from house to house around the *barrio*, waiting to be recognized and allowed in so that the Christ-child may be born. But this "*posada sin fronteras*" (shelter without borders) is public political theater at a door that is closed and heavily guarded: we converge on the menacing border fence, a ten-foot high metal wall donated to the U.S. Border Patrol by the Pentagon after Desert Storm—one war's surplus bolstering another war's front lines. It is organized by immigrants' rights groups on both sides of the border to protest anti-immigrant legislation and popular prejudice.

The traditional litany is recited back and forth across the fence, the role of the Holy Family seeking refuge sung by the Mexican group, while we Californians recite the lines of the hard-hearted innkeeper: *Yo no puedo abrir; no sea algun tunante* ("I cannot open, for you may be bad people"). The no-man's-land of the border is bathed by floodlights and thick with Border Patrol vehicles and helicopters,

⁸ See my comments in *ibid*, pp. 203ff, 217ff.

"innkeepers" who spend millions of taxpayer dollars in an effort to reduce illegal entries across this, the world's most heavily used border crossing. Their mission is to keep out the very ones who a century earlier were expressly invited to the U.S. by the extraordinary verse of the immigrant poet Emma Lazarus that is inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... Send those, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

No seas inhumano; tenos caridad ("Don't be inhuman; have mercy on us"), sings the Mexican "Joseph." We hear but cannot see one another. *Ya se pueden ir, y no molestar*, threatens the Innkeeper. *Porque si me enojo les voy a pegar* ("Better go on, don't bother us. For if I become angry, I shall beat you up.") We use the occasion to talk about the human rights abuses at this border, and to commemorate the hundreds of undocumented immigrants who have died from Border Patrol violence or the harshness of the crossing. When the litany finishes, doves are released on both sides of the fence and fly off, unrestrained by the metal fence, the new global economic order's Berlin Wall. It is an amazing public liturgy in the only place where First and Third World stand adjacent, a free fire zone in the war against the poor. Here we celebrate hope along a wall that runs right through the heart of this little congregation—and through our church and nation.

For U.S. citizens, these are issues of national identity, to choose which America we embrace. Israel's ethic of compassion toward outsiders was shaped by its own history of pain: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex 22:21). We, too, are a nation of immigrants. And for Christians it is a matter of "hearing" Jesus' teaching afresh (Mk 7:14), and that of Third Isaiah before him. If we refuse to take sides with today's outsiders, we too are "without understanding" (Mk 7:18a).

III. Conclusion: A House for All Peoples

Third Isaiah's vision focuses on *ethics*, not *anthropology*, and so does Jesus in Mark 7:1-23. As Martin Luther King famously put it, the issue is "the content of one's character, not the color of one's skin." It's not about sexual orientation but social practice, not about what's between your legs but what's in your heart. The current conversation in our churches concerning whether or not sexual minorities are welcome as full participants in discipleship, and whether Christians should offer sanctuary of undocumented immigrants (see www.newsanctuarymovement.org), must surely stand under *this* Word of God.

Unfortunately our denominations prefer to approach these issues through studied ambivalence, interminable commissions, don't ask/don't tell avoidance, and repressive politeness. And some so-called Christians engage in mean-spirited gay and immigrant bashing. The Christian Right has turned the war *on* terror abroad into a war *of* terror at home against those who don't fit the national ideal, as it

lobbies hard to preserve the heterosexual monopoly on marriage and to militarize our national borders.

There are many sound ethical and political reasons why democratic citizens should support gays and lesbians in their struggle for full inclusion into both church and society. And issues related to the involuntary migration of peoples, and to the geopolitical definition of human communities, are complex in the modern world, and deserve our careful reflection and deliberation. But these are finally *theological* and *pastoral* issues for Christians. Our responsibility is to encounter immigrants and refugees not as statistics, but as human beings who endure extraordinary hardship and trauma in their struggle to survive; to come to know persons of different sexual orientation as folks who struggle with intimacy, love and commitment—just like we ourselves do.

Third Isaiah and Jesus both call us to become a House of radical hospitality that reserves a special place for the otherwise excluded. As John’s gospel puts it: “In my Father’s house there is *lots* of room” (Jn 14:2). Our communities of faith must be about discipleship, not disenfranchisement; communion, not exclusion. Regardless of what *we* do, however, the God of justice will continue to welcome the outsider who wishes to follow, and to warn erstwhile insiders that using God’s name will *never* protect a “den of thieves” from judgment. There is no divided house that can stand, which is why Jesus invites us to dismantle every dividing wall—even if they seem to be bearing walls. May the church follow Jesus, who followed Isaiah, who followed Yahweh, into a House for *all* peoples.