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 Westminster Presbyterian Church, Albany, NY
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Isaiah 56:6-8

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.

Being Multicultural Part 1: Who are We?

I just couldn't let the opportunity pass me by. Here we are in the summer time, and I have three sermons in rapid succession. It would seem a shame not to preach a series, don't you think? So do I.

After my time in Ghana this summer, I keep going over in my head the ways that our partnership in Ghana has transformed our church here at home. So, I wanted to dwell on this for a while and to spend some time reflecting on the way we are: that is multicultural.

It is a discussion that you as a congregation have been having since way before I arrived. I am the latecomer here. But, I do hope you will join me in continuing to prayerfully reflect on who God has called us to be on State Street in Albany.

This church has been mission-minded for generations, and has risen to the call of city ministry long ago. For purposes of today's sermon and the rest of the series, I want to focus on where we are now, who is here now and what our calling is now.

To start things off, I chose the title for today's sermon "Who are we?" for several reasons. Sometimes we get going in our work as church and forget to stop and look around at all that we are doing, at who we are as a community. It's like when you're on a hike on a summer's day, for instance, you get going in a rhythm and a pace, and it may be a while before you get a chance to stop and look at the view from where you are, see the foliage and your companions on the journey.

So, let's do just that. What is the view from where we are? What is around us? Who are our companions on the journey? Who are we?

God has a very specific idea of who we are – of our identity as people of God and the Body of Christ. In fact from time to time, God may have an idea of who we are that is

different from our own. Our identity comes from God, and when we forget who we are or lose our way, God brings us back and reminds us whose child we are.

The people in Isaiah's day, who first heard our scripture passage, had forgotten their identity. This particular portion of Isaiah is directed to the Israelite people who have just returned from Exile. They needed to hear a prophecy from God, and Isaiah obliged.

At the time of the Exile, foreign invaders had shattered their country and people and carted them off as slaves to a foreign land. Can you imagine a more horrific tragedy to live through? After suffering years of servitude and cultural crisis, the people were finally set free to return to their land. The Exile was finally over.

When they returned, their only connection to God, the Temple, was in ruins. The people had forgotten many of the practices and rituals of their heritage. As a people, they set their minds to putting the pieces of their broken world back together. There was a lot of physical work to do, but there was also a lot of cultural and religious work to do.

After being raised in foreign lands, speaking other languages and learning other customs, they needed time to solidify their identity again. "Who are we now?" they may have asked. They needed time to circle the wagons (as we say in Oklahoma) and rebuild their identity among themselves, focusing inwardly to strengthen themselves as a people.

Surprisingly, God does not grant them such time to be apart from other nations. God does not go easy on them even after all they have been through. But instead, God pushes them to welcome the foreign outsiders – even though foreigners were the very ones who got them into this mess in the first place.

Many of the Israelites were trying to keep their community close by excluding others, trying to salvage the remnants of their broken community by drawing definite lines based on nationality, and defining purity based on who is *not* aloud in.

God will have none of it. It doesn't seem to matter how awful the Exile was, how much they suffered or how much they needed to rebuild their community. No matter what their goals, they cannot achieve them at the expense of others. God proclaims - I will gather the outcasts of people Israel, but I will also gather **others** to you as well. I am not the God of one nation only, but all nations will be welcome in this place.

If you asked the community after the Exile 'who are you' the Israelites would have one answer, but God would have quite another. God's house *shall* be a house of prayer for all peoples. It's a must, the non-negotiable character of the gathered people of God.

“The character of the gathered people of God” is another way to say who we are. In a community of faith, the question of who we are is closely linked to what we believe: what we believe about redemption, about God’s action in the world and about how we experience the power of the Holy Spirit. Who we are affects what we believe and what we believe affects who we are. In a community of faith, the two are constantly in motion, in a dance of give and take.

In the PC(USA) we have been talking a lot about what we believe recently. The national church has considered adding a new confession to our book of confessions. That’s right, we have a book of 9 belief statements beginning from the early church, the Reformation and the 20th century.

The belief statement I’m speaking about is the Confession of Belhar, written in 1982 in South Africa. The Reformed Church in America, our brothers and sisters of Dutch heritage, adopted the Belhar Confession in 2010, after provisionally adopting it in 2007.

Our national General Assembly provisionally voted to adopt the confession in 2010. While the majority of local presbyteries did approve it, unfortunately the confession did not receive the two-thirds majority it needed to go further. Nevertheless, this confession has important lessons for us today as we reflect on who we are.

The Belhar confession was written in 1982, and adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. The confession was a catalyst for two denominations in South Africa to come together – the division of the church for black people, and the division of the church for “colored” people.

“Colored” in South Africa was a specific legal distinction for people of mixed descent, including people from other parts of Africa, Asia or Europe. Black South Africans and “Colored” South Africans were legally segregated in all areas of life as well as in the church.

The confession of Belhar takes a clear stance on justice, reconciliation and unity. These two denominations, separated for decades, united in 1994, the same year Nelson Mandela came to power. Their new denomination is entitled The Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa. A belief statement, mere words, made it possible for two groups of people to come together. Two groups who had been defined by the outside now chose to define their institution and their beliefs, and it transformed the way they did church.

The Belhar Confession has sections on unity, reconciliation and justice. It would be difficult to summarize everything here. But I’ll give you some high points. First of all, the confession states that the Church proclaims unity in its actions to show that separation is sin and does not belong to God’s will for our lives. Likewise, the Church is called blessed because it does the work of reconciliation and has been given the divine calling to reconcile. And God has been revealed as the one who

brings justice and true peace to all peoples. Common themes are that enmity and hatred are prevalent in society, and the church combats these sins through unity and reconciliation.

The confession of Belhar is a very courageous document. It is not for the faint of heart. Interestingly enough, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, the formerly white-only Reformed denomination still has not adopted the Belhar Confession.

What does it mean to say we believe in unity, reconciliation and justice? That we stand for these things? In many ways we as a congregation are already showing that we believe in these things. And while actions speak louder than words, words can still go a long way to showing the world who we are, what we stand for and what we believe.

Now, let's come back to State Street. Our situation is very different from Ancient Israelites or from Christians in South Africa. We did not just return from Exile. But, our story is striking.

In a little over a month, we mark the 10th anniversary of September 11th. We also mark 10 years of our partnership in Ghana. A few days after these horrific attacks, on September 15th, this church had a meeting. Did you meet to circle the wagons and focus inward on your own healing? Did you meet to set a clear boundary of who was not welcome here? Did you meet to turn against those who were different from you?

No. Here was a meeting on September 15th to talk about ongoing mission projects in Ghana. Around 65 people gathered for a Saturday night potluck to hear from Americans who had been to Ghana and from Ghanaians who were here in the capital district. They spoke about specific experiences, about a children's home that had particular needs and about the desire for partnerships across the Atlantic.

And, you as a church decided that you wanted to make friends in the world. You did not want to be isolated or separate from anyone, but instead chose to get know the world better.

By God's providence, here was a nation that wanted to be our friends that wanted to foster connections here. When faced with your own crisis of identity, it would have been very easy to close ranks and to take care of one another – of those who were already here.

But, God had a different idea of who we were going to be. And by grace, the message got through. Those faithful gathered on that day chose to recognize God's claim on *this* community and followed the new direction that took us across the Atlantic and back again.

10 Years later and God has done amazing things in our midst. Events moved quickly after that September potluck. You met in October with Comfort and Kwadwo Sarfoh and the Committee on Ghana was formed. Rev. Christian Ocloo from Ghana preached here the following April. Rev. Sandy Hanna and later Rev. Jim Reisner shared the interest in outreach to the local Ghanaian and African communities.

Well, the rest is history. We have traveled to Ghana 4 times in the past 6 years! This one congregation has started new initiatives in Ghana, made countless relationships with individuals and with churches. People who have never left Albany have been a part of this partnership - praying for team members, welcoming preachers and missionaries from Ghana here in Albany, singing "Da Na Se" at the top of their lungs and giving very generously to support these endeavors. Our experiences in Ghana have been integrated into the body of this congregation and have transformed it - have transformed us.

God has given us an identity - We are a house of prayer for all people. It's a must. We are all welcome here. My ancestors are not from this land. Most of our ancestors did not originate in this land. And yet, I have a place here! You have a place here.

Our affirmation of faith this morning is taken from the Belhar Confession. In a few minutes we will proclaim that the church is the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another and that unity must become **visible** so that the world may believe that separation and hatred between people is sin.

What does our unity proclaim? It proclaims quite a bit, frankly. In a city and a nation that is very divided on Sunday morning, we are united. In a world where churches that have been divided along racial lines are still divided this day - our proclamation rings loud and clear.

Who are we? This is who we are! We are a house of prayer for people of all nations! Alleluia! Amen.