

**Same-Gender Marriage as a Theological/Ecclesial Issue:  
Reflections on Isaiah 56:1-8**  
by Ched Myers

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You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly, everywhere... you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go... Knock it out. Duck. Courage utterly opposes the bold hope that this is such fine stuff that the work needs it, or the world. --Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

## **I. Deconstructing Division**

American novelist Annie Dillard used the metaphor about the difficult business of tearing down the walls of one's own house to describe the writer's struggle to improve her work. But it strikes me as keenly descriptive of the task facing First World Christians today. We live in a world in which a social architecture of functional segregation and inequality persists. Divisions of race, class and gender have become so deep that in some cases they threaten the structural integrity of the "House," whether this is understood in terms of an institution like the Anglican Church, or the nation as a whole, or the entire globalized but increasingly rickety civilization. The question is, do 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 national House collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions has long haunted the American social experiment. "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 of slavery that led to the War Between the States in the 1860s. As an historical ultimatum it continues to be felt in our political unconscious:

- it was invoked by Martin Luther King in his famous 1963 speech about racial justice, delivered standing in front of the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC;
- it was 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!"; and

- Americans confronted it as a global truth with the dramatic collapse of the World Trade Center Towers on Sept 11th, 2001.

The truth is this: a House constructed upon social, economic and/or ideological division will either collapse because of its internal structural flaws, or it will 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 the America of rich and poor, but also the America of inclusion and exclusion. The America of inclusion has found expression in the ideal of "liberty and justice for all," and embodied in Indian treaties that were honored, in Civil Rights, women's suffrage, child labor laws, the embrace of immigrants and the current struggle for same gender marriage. 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 genocide, in Jim Crow segregation, in Gilded Age economic stratification, in Immigrant Exclusion Acts and restrictive housing covenants, and in the religious Right's current campaign for a Constitutional Amendment that would prohibit same-gender marriage.

These two visions of America (and an analogous analysis applies for the U.K.) continually compete for our hearts and minds, not least in our churches. Today Christians are once again lining up on both sides, and the choices are again profoundly consequential. On one side is the America of Emma Lazarus' "Golden Door," and Martin King's "I Have a Dream," and Audre Lordes' "Sister Outsider." On the other is the America of George Bush's imperial politics and John Ashcroft's Fortress national security state and James Dobson's "Focus on the Family." On one side are those who understand Civil Rights logic as inevitably expansive into equal rights for all minorities, not just some; on the other are those who believe that justice is a limited good, and that we need to recover an America based not on pluralism but on purity. 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.

I am reminded of that curious and troubling conversation between Jesus and his disciples in Mark's gospel toward the end of his ministry. "Look, what magnificent structures!" (Mk 13:1) they exclaimed to him one day, as they stood intimidated and fascinated before the imposing edifice of the Jerusalem Temple. It was indeed an awesome structure, bigger than life, the architectural symbol of their nation. "Do you see these great buildings?" replied Jesus, unimpressed. "There will not be one stone left upon another; the whole thing must come down!" (13:2). Talk about deconstructionism! How could Jesus suggest such a thing? Because his dictum about

the "divided House" being unable to stand (Mk 3:25), echoed two millennia later by Lincoln, is in Mark's story a trope for the Jerusalem Temple! In a dramatic public action in the Temple precinct Jesus proceeds symbolically to "loot" those who have looted the people (Mk 11:15-17). Shortly thereafter Jesus announces to his disciples that this House must be dismantled, in order to make room for everyone. Is it any wonder that the authorities wanted him killed?

"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). To be sure, this New Testament ethos was eventually abandoned by the Church, which chose instead to accept Constantine's cynical invitation to team up with empire. But the vision has kept resurfacing with every renewal movement throughout our history, whether among Benedictine monks or Franciscan friars, Anabaptist radicals or Methodist reformers, or in our own time, through women's ordination and movements like Inclusive Church. Its roots, however, are a half-millennium before Christ, in the proclamation of a disciple of the great Israelite prophet Isaiah.

## **II. Third Isaiah's Vision of Inclusion: Is 56:1-8**

Isaiah 56:1-8 is the opening stanza of the prophetic oracle sometimes referred to as "Third Isaiah" (Is 56-66). "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 out of prophetic "schools"—we see evidence of such communities already in the Elijah/Elisha cycles (for example 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. This is, of course, what all preachers try to do every time we proclaim the Word into a given context.

Third Isaiah 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; they shall come and behold my Glory" (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 exiles' return from Babylon, between the reconstruction of the Temple (515 BCE) and the time of Nehemiah (444 BCE). This was a watershed time for Israel. Two key issues faced those trying to rebuild Israelite society: one was who was going to lead this project, and the other was who was going to participate in it. Such questions always shape the political landscape, then and now. We have to remember that those who had been exiled to Babylon were the elites of Israelite society: priests, managers, the landed aristocracy, scribes, etc. The majority of peasants 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 tricky situation: 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 a cultic center, which was their own power base;
- ultra-nationalists, who saw this as a chance to rebuild old dreams of sovereignty;
- political front men for Israel's new Persian imperial rulers, who were trying to exert colonial control of the new settlement in Palestine.

All the elites agreed on one thing, however: they would define the reconstruction project. It is not hard to imagine, then, that the situation was complicated, with lots of conflicts with the existing population over property, politics and religion. In fact, when the Persians defeated the Babylonians, King Cyrus had decreed that the returning Israelite leadership could build a Temple in their homeland, but it seems this project was opposed by the so-called "am-ha-aretz," or 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 (this drama is narrated in Ezra chaps. 1-9). One need only reference the situation of Palestine since 1948 to imagine the struggles between the longtime residents on the land and ideologically motivated and politically powerful "latecomers."

The strategy of the returnees was to "purge" the community that had remained by establishing new ethnic purity standards, which focused on shoring up the boundaries of marriage and procreation. The Israelite elites stressed genealogical integrity (which tended to advantage the scribal class, who kept records of their lineage) and Levitical fidelity (which advantaged the priestly class). Their Persian overlords were supportive of such measures, as they wanted their colony to be

ethnically uniform to better enable their imperial political management. This explains why the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are concerned with the issue of ethnic exclusion, and why the people of the land resisted their attempts to assert control. The chronological question of which leader came first is a notoriously thorny one, but what is clear is that Nehemiah allowed existing intermarriages to stand but forbade future ones, while Ezra instructed Judeans who “married out” to divorce their foreign wives. Both thus stressed the need to shore up the ethnic and social boundaries of the reconstructionist community through renewed attention to purity.

They legitimated this on the basis of Dt 23:1-8, which specifically excluded “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, marking the person unacceptable to God.) We can call this the social strategy “anthropological exclusion”—that is, ruling out persons not because of anything they have done, but because of who they are by nature in their bodies. (Clinton Hammock has analyzed this social and historical context in exhaustive detail in “Isaiah 56:1-8 and the Redefining of the Restoration of Judean Community,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Summer 2000).

Third Isaiah argued against this position. Our text specifically takes issue with the view that claims the nation is best protected through purity codes that define insiders and outsiders. Instead, Third Isaiah calls for the boundaries of the community to be preserved through ethical behavior. Whoever keeps the Sabbath, it is argued, is entitled to full inclusion, and the point is underlined by using the most “extreme” examples: eunuchs (sexually nonfunctional or unorthodox males) and foreigners.

The oracle begins with a dramatic opening line that crystallizes the entire argument to follow: “This is what God says: ‘Defend justice! Do what is right! Then I will vindicate you!’” This makes it clear from the outset that the issue is justice, not purity or group boundaries. And justice is defined in 56:2 as: 1) obeying Torah; 2) keeping Sabbath; and 3) turning away from evil. 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 them circulating rather than concentrating, and returning thanks to God (Ex 16:16-19). It is to specifically deconstruct poverty by releasing those who groan under the burden of debt (Deut 15), by allowing the poor to glean the fields (Ex 23:10-12). It is, in other words, to refuse to allow a system of slavery to ever take hold again among a people liberated from Pharaoh by putting limits on work and on accumulation and privilege (as I've outline at length in *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*).

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)

We hear in this verse the voice of those who have internalized the rejection of the dominant culture, whose self-worth and social prospects are nil because of how they are perceived and portrayed publicly. Excluded groups and second class citizens throughout history know all too well this self-hatred, from the text's "The LORD will surely separate me from his people" or "I am just a dry tree" to black children in our own history 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. Such internalized self-negation and external oppression works on the victims of exclusion like a constant "acid rain," as a black psychologist once put it. And it is time, says Third Isaiah, for it to stop.

Because God says—one commentator portrays the prophet's rhetoric here as implying a new legal ruling on case law—that the eunuch who keeps the Sabbath and 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). This is a play on the Hebrew word for eunuch which comes from an unused root meaning to castrate, and occurs 42 times in OT. It 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. After all, Matthew 19:12 famously suggests that there are *eunouchoi* made by men, and others who are eunuchs "from birth." (Faris Malik has argued at length, based on hundreds of ancient sources, that this designation clearly included homosexuals).

Now the prophet knew very well that eunuchs were, according to Levitical strictures, supposed to be "cut off" from benefits of cult and family life, because they stood outside the usual patterns of procreation and the blessings attendant to that, including land ownership. This would mean, of course, that their names would also 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 pride of genealogy or title to land. This is symbolized by a special "monument"

and an “everlasting name.” (Playfully, the Hebrew word rendered as “monument” in the NRSV is *yd*, which can also be translated as ‘hand’, ‘power’, or ‘place’—and is also a euphemism for ‘penis.’) Eunuchs were considered to be second lowest on the totem pole; the only class below them was foreigners. And this is exactly who the prophet next addresses. He repeats himself with a little elaboration: if foreigners follow God, serve God, and 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). Why? How? “Because My House will be known as a place where all nations pray.” And there 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, he says, and let the foreigners in.

The prophet broke the taboo of the silence that kills, and attempted to tear down the bearing walls that divide God’s House. In his view, the Jerusalem Temple was meant to be a world House, not a national shrine (as every other Temple in antiquity was), and Yahweh welcomes whosoever desires to follow the Way, regardless of who they are in their bodily identity. Third Isaiah’s view did not, however, prevail. It was the ethnocentric strategy of Ezra and Nehemiah that 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. The power of ethnocentrism and chauvinism is indeed very powerful. But God’s Word did not prove fruitless.

More than four centuries later, a young Jesus of Nazareth preaching his first sermon dusted off that Isaiah scroll one day in synagogue, looked hard at his audience, and read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” (Lk 4:18f). And when he was done citing Is 61:1f—the heart of Third Isaiah’s oracle—he added: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). The struggle for inclusion began with a re-appropriation of this prophetic tradition. Indeed, it is not overstating the case to say that Jesus may have staked his entire ministry on the vision of Third Isaiah. Not only is he invoked in Jesus’ inaugural sermon at Nazareth, but also at the culmination of his struggle with the public authorities in the Jerusalem Temple. In the midst of his dramatic ‘cleansing’ 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 was Third Isaiah’s vision of radical inclusion that animated Jesus’ constant transgressions of the social architecture of his day: eating with lepers, hanging out with women, touching the impure, teaching the excluded. And it may have been what got him strung up. If this vision was so formative for Jesus, therefore, perhaps it ought also be important for us today.

### III. Politics of Purity or Community of Conviction?

Third Isaiah's argument focuses on ethics, not anthropology, or as Martin Luther King famously put it, about "the content of your character, not the color of your skin." It's not about sexual orientation but sexual practice, not about what's between your legs but what's between your ears and in your heart and the work of your hands and feet. The current conversation and the culture war in our churches concerning whether or not sexual minorities are welcome as full participants in discipleship must surely stand under this Word of God.

And it is a hard word to our churches today, which prefer to approach the issues through studied ambivalence, interminable commissions, don't ask/don't tell avoidance, repressive politeness, or worst of all, downright mean-spirited gay-bashing. Everywhere, particularly in America today, citizens are being encouraged to fear those who are different from James Dobson's "Focus on the Family" ideal, to suspect those who have foreign accents or Muslim spirituality. The war on terror abroad has become a war of terror on enemies conjured close at hand. President Bush and his allies wish to amend the U.S. Constitution to preserve the heterosexual monopoly on marriage. And our churches seem content to wage internal wars around questions of sexuality while remaining largely silent about imperial wars abroad.

There are lots of sound ethical and political reasons why we should support gays and lesbians in their struggle for full inclusion into both church and society (see following article). But finally this is a theological issue for Christians. The gospel of Third Isaiah calls us to become a world church of radical hospitality that reserves a special place for the otherwise excluded; or as John's Jesus put it: "In my Father's house there is lots of room" (Jn 14:2). At a time when gay and lesbian citizens are watching their civil rights publicly debated, and when gay and lesbian Christians are watching their discipleship questioned, this text calls away from our self-righteous gate-keeping toward ethical Sabbath-keeping. It is time for our churches to focus on being communities of conviction rather than purveyors of purity politics. We should be about discipleship, not disenfranchisement; communion, not excommunication.

Regardless, however, of what our churches do, the God of justice will continue to welcome the outsider who wishes to follow in, and still warns erstwhile insiders that using God's name will never protect a den of thieves from judgment. There is no divided house that can stand, said Jesus, so let us take down every dividing wall—even if they seem to us to be bearing walls of culture. Only in this way can we follow the Jesus who followed Isaiah, who followed Yahweh into a House for all peoples.