

## Believers Without Borders

Isaiah 42: 1-9

The movie *Forrest Gump* has a poignant scene with the little boy Forrest boarding a school bus. As he slowly walked down the aisle looking for a place to sit, each of the children he passed said the same thing, “no room.” Now admittedly, Forrest was a little odd, something of an acquired taste. No one willing was willing to share a seat. All little Forrest encountered were barriers and borders until one little girl – Jenny -- made room. She created space and Forrest sat down.

Have you ever been the new kid, an outsider, wanting to be let in? Being excluded means wanting to be included, coming up against barriers and borders. Do you ever feel *on the outside*? What is that like for you? I have moved a lot in my life. For my family, our move to Kansas City has included many *outsider* experiences. This congregation made us feel very welcome and we appreciate very deeply the relationships we have developed here. At the same time, the fact that we moved in north of the river set us at a cultural from people living in Brookside. The reality that we were never part of Broadway Baptist Church, we are outside many of the familiar and comfortable relationship networks here. I share these experiences not to complain, but just to illustrate that pretty much everybody feels on the outside sometimes.

What about the other side? Most people have some places in their lives that feel familiar and comfortable? Do you have a particular network of relationships here where you feel comfortable, familiar, and accepted? Maybe you have a good friend and the two of you really enjoy being together. It is not a bad thing to have a comfortable niche, close friends, or even a group to which belong that is not exactly open to new people joining. You all like the group the way it is. It’s kind of like a family, hard to get into unless you are born or adopted into them. Sometimes groups within churches are so familiar and comfortable with each other that they actually shut out others – often unintentionally. In extreme cases, the boundaries of the group become barriers and borders around an exclusive group of relationships. It is very natural, but can be destructive to church life and church growth.

Crossroads Church used to be very much that way. One of the biggest complaints people coming in had was how difficult it was to feel included. The strength of this congregation was its strong sense of community – like a family. That strength enabled Crossroads to survive the turbulence of its formation and early development, but the tendency to be a closed and inward-looking community threatened its growth and vitality. When healthy boundaries become barriers and borders that shut people out of our lives, both personally and communally, they are no longer healthy. We effectively close ourselves off from people who can challenge and enrich us.

I’m happy to say that Crossroads is a welcoming and inclusive community today. We still have our moments, but the vast majority of visitors perceive us as a very welcoming community that still feels very much like family. With all this in mind, let’s see what guidance we can find in the Bible.

The Jewish people have lived in a great tension almost since their formation. The religious and legal system they received from Moses reinforced the way they saw themselves, as a peculiar and unique people, and heightened their sense of being distinct from other nations. Their ethnic, national, and religious identity – a boundary -- soon became a barrier, a border that was marked by dietary restrictions, Sabbath observance, and rules of ritual purity. This self-understanding was in tension with what they also perceived as their call from Yahweh to be a light and blessing to the nations. Their mission was to introduce other peoples to the God they had come to know in their corporate experience. Israel lived in the tension between boundaries and barriers.

Second Isaiah is the designation given to an otherwise anonymous section of written material that is included as chapters 40-55 of the book of Isaiah. The material contains an incredibly beautiful set of poems we call the servant songs. The hero of these songs is the nation Israel whose redemption is promised in the midst of exile. Jesus clearly interpreted much of his ministry in terms of these songs.

Who was this servant? Isaiah 41: 8 clearly tells us that *the servant* is the people of Israel. This general idea of a messiah gradually came to be understood in terms of a particular individual by the time Jesus lived, though Jesus was unique in taking his interpretation of Messiah from 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah's *servant*.

The Servant Song of Isaiah 42 is a powerful and profound statement of calling renewed – a reminder to Israel of its national identity in the very midst of its brokenness, exile, and defeat. They are a chosen people: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” They have a mission from Yahweh: “I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Finally, they have a reason to hope, to believe again – to trust that success in the mission is “not by might, not by power, but by God’s Spirit.”

The central message of Isaiah 42 to a people in exile is that they have not be deserted. God has “called ... and kept you, [given you] “as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,<sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Those of us who follow Jesus can surely see this message in Jesus’ message. Our mission is similar to the mission set before Israel. The deep challenge of that mission is as true for us today as for those in Jesus’ time and as for those in the day of the writing of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah.

Israel was in exile and bondage. Some voices blamed that exile on Israel’s failure to be unique enough, separate enough, and faithful enough by keeping the rules of religious fidelity to Yahweh. Exile was a punishment for the failure to maintain clear boundaries as the chosen people, failure have closed borders as a nation. 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah does not dispute this, but instead emphasizes Yahweh’s call for Israel to be a blessing to the nations. That call, that mission, needs to be the identity of the people of God in each generation.

Given all this, how will you and I reach out to touch others in Jesus' name? How will we at Crossroads Church be a light and blessing to others? I suggest that we have to begin with those personal boundaries. Who are we and where are we going? We need to know that. We are a faith community of people on journey together. We value questions and encourage each person to discover their own deepest questions and ask them right out loud, even in the worship service. We value people finding the answers to their questions that right for them on the journey. We value community as a place of trust, support, inclusiveness, and love.

Discernment of identity is an ongoing process, but the knowledge we have now can really help us get started. As our self-identity begins to come into focus, we need to see more clearly those we want to touch. To whom are we reaching out? What needs do they have? Where is their pain? What are their questions? Finally, what are we offering? What light and blessing does this community have to offer those we hope to touch?

Crossroads Church is a community that includes Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, but probably more Democrats than either Republicans or Independents. This community includes theological liberals, moderates, and conservatives, with a least a few identify yourselves lying outside these categories -- but we probably have more liberals than moderates, conservatives, or others. More people here probably lives south of the river than north, though we have both. There are more from Missouri than Kansas, but many from Kansas

Our congregational task is to become more respectful of our minority voices – to find a way to learn from them -- while not losing track of who we are. Our task is also to reach out to those who reflect both our majority and our minority voices. The light we have to share is our commitment to be a place to bring honest questions, to trust in the support of loving community, and discover the gifts God has given us.

In the play *Our Town*, a girl named Rebecca Gibbs shares this with her brother George. “I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said, ‘Jane Crofut; the Crofut farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire, United States of America; the Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere, the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe, the Mind of God. That’s what it said on the envelope.’”

The invitation I have for you today is to become more a more a believer without borders. This means to embrace who you are and discover where you want to go and the incredible richness that lies within you. It also means to embrace the mission of making space in your life and journey for company – to welcome fellow travelers and invest time and energy in celebrating and encouraging their journey as well. Our mission here at Crossroads Church is to be a community of believers without borders. I invite you to share your journey with us here. I invite you to deepen your journey in this place where, in God, “we live and move and have our being.” Affirm with us that, in the mind of God each of us is home – that in the mind of God, all of us are home.