

## **Us and them**

Isaiah 49:1-7

January 16, 2011

Who are we?

We are Americans. We are Iowans. We are residents of the Cedar Valley.

We are white. Well, no, that's not true. Not all of us are white.

We are Republicans. Well, no, that's not true. Not all of us are Republicans.

We are members of the upper middle class. Well, no, not all of us.

We are Christians. We are members of the United Church of Christ. We are congregationalists. We are members of First Congregational Church, Waterloo.

We are, as one member described us years ago, socially liberal, politically conservative, and theologically indifferent. Well, no, we're not. That does not describe who we are anymore, at least not all of us.

Who are we?

Who are they?

They are those who are not Americans, who are not Christians, who are not congregationalists. They are the people of a different faith, a different nationality, a different political persuasion, a different church affiliation, a different social class.

Who "they" are depends on who "we" are, and the boundaries between us and them are always shifting. Sometimes "us" is larger. Sometimes it's smaller.

Sometimes we extend the limits and enlarge our embrace, like this last week in Tucson when partisan differences were set aside, at least for an evening, to remember the common causes, common griefs, and common dreams that hold "us" together. But sometimes boundaries shrink and the lines between "us" and "them" are drawn more sharply. Sometimes it gets down to just you and me against the world!

Who are we? Who is "us"? And why is it so important to us to define who "us" is?

It's important because we have a desire for relationship, for connection, for a sense of belonging, for a sense of identity. We want to be part of something, part of something bigger than ourselves, part of something that matters.

I want to be, not just a guy living on some street, but an Iowan, an American! I'm an Iowan, a Panther, a Hawkeye, a member of First Congregational Church, a Rotarian. I'm an American, one of the people of the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Being part of an "us" is a source of pride. It gives us a sense of honor and a sense of purpose and a sense of security because we know the rest of "us" have our back!

Being part of an "us" becomes even more important when we feel stressed and beleaguered, when the world around us is chaotic and threatening. When I feel threatened, I need to know whom I can trust and whom I cannot, whom I can count on and whom I must protect myself from. I need to know who "them" is, because "they" are the enemy!

Who are "they"? Muslims, tea party activists, nanny state liberals. Fundamentalists, mega-church crusaders, equal marriage rights advocates -- vote them out! When times are tough, the line between "us" and "them" is drawn very sharply indeed!

At the time when the prophecies of Isaiah were recorded, Israel was in the midst of some very tough times. A good number of the people of Judah, the remaining southern half of the kingdom of Israel, had been forcibly relocated along with their leaders. They lived in exile in Babylon. They were homeless, powerless, humiliated, a people without land, a people without dignity. They were despised and rejected, the servants of foreign kings.

But the word of the Lord came to them through the prophet Isaiah! The word of the Lord came to them to remind them who they are, to remind them who "us" is. Who are we? We are the Lord's servant, the Lord's chosen people.

*Before I was born, the Lord chose me,  
and appointed me to be his servant ...  
He said to me, "Israel, you are my servant;  
because of you, people will praise me."*

We are the Lord's servant: chosen, prepared, equipped for the task the Lord has for us. The Lord has made our words "as sharp as a sword." The Lord made us "like an arrow, sharp and ready for use."

We are armed and ready! We are ready to do what the Lord has called us to do!  
We are not the despised servant of foreign kings. We are the honored servant  
of the Lord! This is who we are!

And this, the Lord says to us -- to Israel -- is our task: our task is to bring back  
the scattered people of Israel. We will bring the people home! We will restore  
to us, to all of "us," our homeland! Our task is to save "us," to restore our  
dignity and honor and pride. The Lord promises us:

*Kings will see you released  
and will rise to show their respect;  
princes will also see it,  
and they will bow low to honor you.*

In the midst of tough times, the Lord reminds the people of Israel that they are  
his. The Lord reminds them who "us" is, and promises to save "us," to restore  
to "us" our land and our honor.

If Israel's task is our task, if we too are called by the Lord to be his servant  
people, how may we apply Isaiah's prophetic words and the Lord's promises to  
our time and place and situation?

Isn't it our job too to gather together the people of God that have become  
scattered and divided, to bring "us," all of "us," home? Isn't it our job to find  
common cause with each other, to reclaim our common Christian identity?  
Isn't it our job to restore to the church its dignity and honor and respect in our  
society, to redeem the church from a place of neglect and seeming irrelevance,  
to let the church again be the powerful voice for the way of the Lord it is  
intended to be? This is who we are! This is "us!"

But this is not the whole story, is it? Listen to the word of the Lord, spoken  
through the prophet Isaiah, spoken to Israel in the midst of their degradation  
and humiliation and homelessness:

*I have a greater task for you, my servant.  
Not only will you restore to greatness  
the people of Israel who have survived,  
but I will make you a light to the nations --  
so that all the world may be saved.*

The task of the servant of the Lord is to bring light to the nations, so all the  
world may be saved! The Lord protects "us" and saves "us" and equips "us" so  
that we may be the instrument of saving "them." We will gather the people ...  
and then we will gather the people!

The Lord shines his light on us and in us, so that we may bring that same light, the Lord's light, to all the nations, to "them." Isn't it fair to say, then, that our task, the task of the Lord's servant, is make "them" part of "us"? Or to make "us" large enough to include "them" ... because God chooses "them" too, because God saves "them" too, because God shines his light on us and on them alike, on all of us?

It is astonishing that in the midst of their suffering and humiliation, when the "us" that was Israel was in jeopardy of disappearing altogether, God called his people to embrace "them," even the nation that was oppressing them! God called his people to serve the nations, all the nations of the world, by bringing them light. To what do you suppose God calls us?

Who are we? We are the Lord's servant. We are the bearer of God's light. We are a light to the nations.