

INVITATION: JUST AS I AM

Isaiah 55:1-9; Third Sunday in Lent, c

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Prayer: Dear God, we come here from widely and wildly different places of the heart, and we come here because we know that here we are welcome. We come here because we have heard that there just might be a place for us at the table of your kingdom. We've heard that, but sometimes we just find it too good to be true. So startle us with the clear word of your grace. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Harvey Cox was, until his retirement last year, a distinguished professor of theology at Harvard Divinity School and often on the “cutting edge” of theological and sociological trends. His book *The Secular City* caused tremors in 1965 as he highlighted the rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion, way before it was “cool” to do so! He was arrested shortly before that book was published for participating in a civil rights demonstration here in the south.

So some of us were surprised at the title of his memoir that he wrote a few years ago about his personal faith. The title? “Just as I am,” that old revival hymn.

He explained that “Just as I am” is the “Invitation Hymn” that was always used at the end of revivals as he began his faith journey in a small Baptist church in Pennsylvania,

“when a life without God and hell’s terror’s have just been vividly painted and the doors are opened to accept Christ and be saved. The “Invitation” is given. And now with very head bowed and every eye closed, the preacher or visiting evangelist urges those in the congregation who have not yet made their decision for Christ to come forward. The organ plays “Just as I am.” The choir sings too, “without one plea/ But that thy blood was shed for me.”

And then the mature theologian reflected on that experience years later with respect and affection:

“Though the words may sound lachrymose to many, for me they still convey a sense of comfort and assurance. Was I really acceptable to God ‘just as I am?’ Was it really true that I needed no improvements, no alterations, that I could enter the presence of the Most High, the terrifying *mysterium tremendum* (as I later learned to say) just as I am? If true, that was very good news to an adolescent who was always being reminded—or so it seemed—of my shortcomings and defects.” “I was never good at football or basketball. Someone else played the saxophone sweeter than I did. Most of the girls seemed to prefer other guys for dates. Although I did fairly well in my classes, but there was always someone, usually one of the Girls, who got a higher score on the exam. Both my

parents seemed to love me Unconditionally but like all kids, I sensed behind their expression of Affection a lot of hopes and expectations I was not sure I could live up to.

“But God accepted me just as I am? That was not judgment, but good news. Years later, when I read Paul Tillich’s famous sermon entitled “You are accepted,” I knew exactly what it meant, and I could hear the melody of the old hymn still humming on in the back of my mind.”¹

On virtually every page of scripture, in both the Old and the New Testaments, is an amazing and radical announcement. God, the creator of all that is, the mysterious life beyond all life whose name is so holy it is never pronounced, God wants nothing so much of us as our presence at the banquet table, wants nothing of us so much as our acceptance of divine love, wants nothing of us so much as that we should allow that accepting love to recreate us, renew us, and redeem us so thoroughly that we actually begin to live it in all our relationships.

Where else do you find that message? What God wants of us is not moral perfection, but perfect love. What God wants is not to judge and condemn, but to see our joy and hopefulness, our own lives of justice and love and acceptance. And where do we see that most vividly? In an invitation to a meal.

Twenty five hundred years ago there was a community of Jews living in exile, trying to figure out what went wrong. They blamed themselves. They wanted to know what they did to infuriate God so much, and what they could do to get back in God’s good graces. And to that lonely, oppressed community who were beating themselves over the head, the prophet issued not a chastisement—but an invitation:

Ho, everyone who thirsts.
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
And your labor for that which does not satisfy?

...Eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food...
...For you shall go out in joy...;
The mountains and the hills...shall burst out in song.

What is God’s response to a downtrodden, shaken, disheartened people, who, if truth be known, had forgotten God’s love for them? God’s people are invited to a banquet—to celebrate with songs of joy and thanksgiving because their God of anger and judgment is always in the greater context of God who is full of mercy and compassion and love.

This has always been a tension in religion through the years. Most religion urges people to try harder, to do and be more to placate the gods, to impress God, to win God’s favor. “If you do this, then God will be gracious to you.” But here we have a radical new thought: “God is already gracious, so in grateful response, come to the banquet!” Until that message of a God of love and

mercy, the invitation, is issued in a person, the life of one who lives like it, who does not come to condemn and judge, but accepts and welcomes, and who even told stories about it.

Stories about a great banquet in which the host had invited guests. But everyone sent regrets: Sorry, can't make it. I'm going to have a headache. Have to wash my hair." So the host went out into the streets and invited anyone and everyone to come, including those who had never been invited to a banquet; those who had had it drummed into them that they were not acceptable.

Remember that story? Or the story about a father who welcomed a son who deserved to die according to the customs of the day; but when he returned home he prepared a banquet.

See, this was a radical redefinition of religion and a radical new idea of God.

In Harvey Cox's reminiscence of "Just as I Am," he referred to Paul Tillich's famous sermon. Tillich is regarded as one of the most important Protestant theologians and Christian intellectuals of the 20th century. He was often called, "The theologian's theologian," and his three volume Systematic Theology is owned by more pastors than read by pastors. He was exiled from Nazi Germany and taught at Union Seminary in New York, then Harvard, and finally the University of Chicago.

I went back to his famous sermon "You are Accepted," this week. It is a masterpiece. In it Tillich talks about sin and grace, two common and irreplaceable religious words. Sin, he argues, is a state of being before it is an act. When religion focuses on sins, instead of Sin, it always creates two categories of people—sinners and the righteous, the good and the evil doers—and that's where religion goes off the tracks. Sin, singular, with a capital S, is the problem, Tillich said, and then he defined it, not as immoral acts, but as a state of separation from God, separation from self, separation from others—alienation.

And he said that the human condition is not adequately described as immoral and evil, but as alienated and separated, aloneness, meaninglessness. "In every soul there is a sense of aloneness and separation," he wrote.

Isn't that what psychologists have been telling us? That from infancy, we fear separation, first from parents and caregivers, and then friends and lovers and spouses. All our lives we live in anxiety produced by fear of separation. And we believe that it is Jesus Christ who has answered our loneliness and separation. In Jesus Christ is our reunion with God and with self—and to the degree we live in that reunion, with others.

There was a news article this week that stated that over the past few years there has been a statistical decline in bullying. Ever since the shootings at Columbine, studies have shown that one of the leading causes of such violence was bullying, teasing, exclusion, humiliation by other students. And so a concerted effort has been made to change a culture that divides students into a caste of insiders and outsiders and a blasé attitude by adults that dismisses bullying as a rite of passage.

Now there are other explanations, of course, not the least of which is the ridiculously easy accessibility of a gun. But it is a reminder of the very real pain that is caused by overt exclusion and separation—and the consequent unbelievable violence that sometimes results.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells about looking out at a full synagogue on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—the day Jews fast and pray that God will forgive. “Men and women who attend no other service of the year attend this one. People who usually arrive halfway through one of our lengthy services make sure to come on time tonight,” he writes.

When all is ready and all are seated, Rabbi Kushner nods to the cantor who chants: “By consent of the authorities in heaven and on earth, we permit sinners to enter and be part of the congregation.”

“People crowd into that service,” Kushner says, “because they know their shortcomings and they need a word of forgiveness and acceptance.”²

Religion doesn’t need to come down hard on us, always condemning our sins and warning of divine judgment. I think that most of us are well aware of our shortcomings. What religion ought to be about is addressing our alienation, our separation, our aloneness.

“You are accepted,” Paul Tillich wrote. Whatever else is true about you, you are welcome in God’s presence.

As I said, I went back to the sermon Tillich preached. It is perhaps the most eloquent and powerful articulation of grace –anywhere.

Listen to it:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we are estranged. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us. Sometimes at that moment grace breaks into our darkness and it is as if a voice were saying, “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us we experience grace.

And then he concluded:

After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement.³

You and I are invited into the presence of the Most High. There is no question any longer of God's gracious welcome—only our readiness and willingness. We are invited, each and every one of us, to the banquet. There is a place prepared for you, regardless of who you are. You are invited to the Table of the Lamb of God.

Just as I am, thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down.
Now to be thine, yea thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Amen.

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¹ Harvey Cox, *Just As I Am*, Pp. 151-152.

² Harold Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be?*, p. 1.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundation*, "You Are Accepted."

Isaiah 55:1-9

1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. **2** Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. **3** Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. **4** See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. **5** See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. **6** Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; **7** let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. **8** For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. **9** For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.