

Divided or United  
Ezra 9:1-4, 10:1-5 (with Ruth)  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
July 29, 2018  
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

This past week I was at CYF Camp, which is our church camp for high school youth. In our region there was a change this year with the organization of CYF camps. For as long as I can remember there were 3 camps – identified as camps 15, 16, and 17. Three decades ago, as a youth in this region, I attended camp 16.

As you can imagine, each camp gained its own personality and reputation, counselors and campers returned year after year, traditions were developed.

This year they changed things up. With the newer camp facilities and the numbers attending the camps, it no longer made sense to offer three camps, but instead two camps should be able to offer space to the same number of campers. Meanwhile, everyone was aware that change is hard...that traditions and dates and communities develop and disruptions to that can be difficult. We also went into camp this week aware that we were combining campers who had previously had separate identities, and if we're honest, who were from camps that had sometimes even been competitive with each other.

So, questions were alive in our conversations – would the kids from the different camps merge well? What traditions should be maintained and which ones needed to be let go? What would the new traditions be? Would we end up with a camp filled with groups of campers – those with a history from one camp over here and a history with another camp over there? These questions were real because change is hard and because people tend to group with those like them, those with whom they share something in common.

Now, I am happy to say, and I think Alex who was at camp this week with me would agree, that it went well. Different groups merged together and they found a new identity as one camp. They didn't stand at their borders or hold fast to their traditions in ways that didn't allow new people in. Rather they were willing to welcome new friends, to embrace new traditions, and even to let go of some beloved practices.

And throughout this experience this passage from Ezra was swirling around in my head – another story about the identity of a group and the choice to include others or not.

So, let's begin this look at Ezra by remembering what is going on. The story really starts hundreds of years earlier. We remember that after Abraham was called to go to a new land and be the father of a new people...after Moses was raised up and led the people out of bondage...after the people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, a time that allowed them to figure out who they understood God was asking them to be...after they settled in the land they understood to be promised to them and lived for a while under a system of judges...after all of this, the people asked for a king. They wanted to be like other nations, to have a centralized government – not just under God, but with a king they could see and name. In spite of the downsides, God let them have a king and Samuel, the prophet, anointed Saul. There was a series of three kings – perhaps the best known Biblical kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. But that was the end to one centralized government. Following Solomon, the people of Israel divided into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom, also known as Israel, and the southern kingdom, known as Judah. And then for many years they lived side by side with different kings, sometimes allying together to fight common enemies, sometimes fighting each other. Then around the year 721bce, the northern kingdom fell to the great power of Assyria. While the southern kingdom breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn't them, and likely felt a bit of arrogance believing that

because Jerusalem was in their land they could not be defeated, some years later – around 587bce – they too fell, this time to the Babylonians. Defeat led to the exile of their leaders, of the landed people, of most anyone with money and power. And they lived in exile for a period of years ranging from decades to more than a century.

Their hope came when the Persians defeated the Babylonians and Cyrus, their leader, encouraged the return of the Israelites to their land and even gave them resources to start rebuilding. And yet, it is never quite that simple. Many years and many leaders later we get to the point where we are in the story today and still many are in exile, still the city has not returned to its former glory, still the temple has not been rebuilt.

And because so much time has passed, this means that there are many Israelites who have never known Jerusalem...many who have never lived in the “promised land”...many who have never known a what it is to live under a Jewish king.

Meanwhile, they have also been living in a foreign land that has now become home with people and religion and customs, many of which are different from those the Israelites had before exile.

What this means, as they return, is that they are trying to discover again, or for many for the first time, what it means to be Jewish, what it means to have this particular relationship with God, what it means to reclaim their lost identity. And what we witness here in these verses from Ezra is that some of their leaders’ approach is to define their identity narrowly and hold on to it strongly for fear of losing it again.

It is into this context that we hear the words, “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the people of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their

children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong, and do it.”<sup>1</sup>

And if you hear those words and gasp – good for you. If you listen to that passage and your heart hurts at the thought of sending away your spouse and children because they come from a different place than you do – I suspect you aren’t actually very different from most of the people who heard those words in Ezra’s day.

But what do we do with this? One approach is that we can opt to just dismiss it. Many among us are especially willing to do that with passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that we experience conflict over.

Another approach is to wonder together. Why did this make sense? What were they afraid of? What was going on? Again, if we remember that they had lost their identity and their home, then maybe we can at least try to understand why they might have gone to that extreme...why, when they felt threatened, it could have made sense to build some borders, to clarify who was in and who was out, to remove what they felt threatened by. Even if we don’t agree with this approach, perhaps we can at least understand it.

And then, we might also remember this: the words we hear from Ezra, aren’t the only words we hear on this topic. In fact, an earlier book of the Hebrew Scriptures, set in an earlier time, is understood by some scholars to have been recorded during this same period.<sup>2</sup> That is the book of Ruth. And if you remember the story of Ruth it is the story of a foreign woman who chooses to return to Israel with her mother-in-law even when everything reasonable says she would have a better life if she stayed in her homeland, returning to her father’s house. But

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra 10:2b-4, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12947-ruth-book-of>

instead, you can read in the book of Ruth, how Ruth chooses Naomi and not only does she return to Israel with her, but she marries a Jewish man and becomes the great-grandmother of the beloved King David. A foreign woman's lineage produces a beloved Jewish king.

So, on this journey we are taking this summer of looking again and reading again, we are reminded that rarely is the answer simple. Sure, we can pull a sentence out of the Bible and apply it to the situation we want it to support and call it a day. But that is not faithful to the text. We must have the context and we must hear the rest of the story.

Here is the reality: there were conflicted voices on the question of how this should be handled. Yes, there were some who couldn't see past exclusion, who feared for all that had been lost and the reality that it could happen again, who didn't know any way to protect themselves other than to cut out anyone who wasn't just like them and create a culture of like-minded and like-committed people. *And*, yes, there were also some who couldn't see why exclusion was necessary, who not only remembered the stories of the many places in their history where foreigners had become allies, but also remembered the celebrated stories when foreigners had become part of the community.

It is important that we pay attention to the scriptures and engage the conversation that our Bible is engaging within itself. It is important we remember, as the kids at camp did this week, that the Bible is not a single book with a single author and a single story, but a library of various genres of literature, written over the span of thousands of years and by many authors. The Bible is a library of books connected by their commitment to God and their connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition. But the Bible is *not* one book of like minded stories or a single narrative without conflict.

So, what do we do? On one hand the tradition of Ezra tell the people to purify, to only allow their own, even to send away those who are already connected because their background is not Jewish. On the other hand, the tradition of Ruth reminds us of a foreign woman who is essential to the story, who becomes the great-grandmother of King David. And along with Ruth we have other words such as those from the Torah – the first five books of the Bible – refrains that remind the people of Israel of the importance of caring for the stranger and welcoming the foreigner because they were once strangers in a land not their own.

Again, we are reminded that the Bible is place to begin conversations. We are not faithful if we pull out our favorite verse to support our favorite argument and ignore the complexity.

*We* struggle alongside the ancient people with questions of welcome and inclusion, and with questions of what these values mean for our own identity.

And, again, we are reminded that as people who follow Jesus, finally we lay our struggles next to the example he set.

When we wonder who is included and who should be kept out – we look to the one who crossed boundaries, touched the untouchable, and ate with those the law deemed unclean.

When we wonder who is outside the love of God – we look to the example of Jesus who met everyone with God's love.

When we wonder whether we should live as people divided by principles and practices, by lands and beliefs, we look to the one who was the great unifier, who brought together a great variety of people in God's loving embrace.

Amen.