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Leviticus 19:33-34; Ezra 10:1-5; Isaiah 56: 1-8  
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### A Mixed Multitude

Good morning church, I have a confession for you. When I started thinking about this sermon series about texts in conflict with one another, these were the texts that jumped to my mind first.

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. Amen.

**Who do we say we are? Are we:  
Aliens in a land not our own?  
A bunch of cradle Mennonites  
A community of righteousness?**

This question can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, because who we say we are defines who belongs. I'll start with a story familiar to some, but not all of us. In the past, Mennonites fled from Europe, trying to escape the military draft. That story instilled an identity of persecuted people, who chose their opposition to military service above their own safety. This story has borne the fruit of the peace center and the story we heard about Arney's life yesterday. And indeed, the story of who some of us are is rooted in who our ancestors were and can be deeply inspiring. It can bolster us when we do difficult things. However, I also know that not everyone has that story. My family was from Alsace Lorraine, a disputed territory between France and Germany. Others of you also have different stories of your family or perhaps the cruel hands of time have eroded any clear memories beyond a few generations.

*Indeed, we are a mixed multitude of people. Each with their own story of who we are.*

Today's scriptures are about this question of "who are we" told from the two greatest turning points of the Old Testament. The Exodus and the Exile. Leviticus calls the people to remember that they are foreigners from Egypt, and therefore they should treat any other foreigners as equal citizens. This really reminds me of the old saying, that the US is a nation of immigrants. My ancestors showed up at a port, speaking only German, and to my knowledge, someone wrote their name down in a ship manifest and waved them through. Yet, starting with the Chinese exclusion act, the U.S. started to tell the story of who was really an American and who was a foreigner. So which is this nation, a nation of immigrants or a nation of "real" Americans? You shall know which by its fruit.

*Leviticus says the Israelites are immigrants, therefore, treat everyone as a citizen.*

Both Ezra and Isaiah are texts written at the end of exile when the leadership of Israel was returning home to Jerusalem. However, they returned to Jerusalem which was not how their grandparents left it. Babylon forcibly exiled people from across their empire to Jerusalem. So were the Israelites sinful because they intermarried with people from across the empire or were the lines of native and immigrant erased by the ethnic reshuffle? Shall the people of God be defined by ethnicity or following the Sabbath?

You shall know which by its fruit.

What kind of fruit do you think comes from a sense of ethnic purity, from a measuring contest of blood? I bet that the same powers and principalities that say that some people are “real” Americans have that same story of people being worthy because of blood purity. The story that foreign wives and children should be rejected, bears the fruit of hatred. But today I tell you when we define people based on things they cannot change, then truly Christ has no power. I cannot transform the color of my skin or who my ancestors were, but I can transform if I respect the Sabbath.

What I’m trying to say is that, with Ezra, I cannot really be impartial and say, there is wisdom in both texts. All I can say is that I can see Ezra’s intolerance. The intolerance of people who do not have a compassionate heart to accept people different from them. A different race, gender, sexual orientation, age, experience in life... I cannot listen to Ezra because I have tasted the fruit of intolerance and it is a bitter fruit. In my youth I was spoon-fed the story of how good Christians are only attracted to members of the opposite gender, but when I started to study the scriptures and saw the Holy Spirit within my gay fellow pastors my mind was opened to a story of faithfulness to God, rather than who was in or out.

I wonder if Isaiah speaks differently from Ezra because he became friends with Eunuch or knew an interracial couple. Perhaps Isaiah read Leviticus or the Holy Spirit declared that the world changed during the exile and the sweet fruit was to accept people of all nations and sexualities into the people of God.

In truth, I only know my own story and it takes great compassion and generosity to listen to the stories of others. As I have read these biblical stories of “who are we” I realize that this gathered community today is not just one thing. This church is a mixed multitude. Catholics, Agnostic, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, White, Latino, Japanese and more. By evidence of you being here, you are fulfilling Isaiah’s requirement, to respect the Sabbath and keep it holy. Let all other dividing walls be banned from this world.

Who do you say that we are?  
Let us generously listen to each other’s stories

And may our stories bear good fruit to build this community up.