

“Xenia”

Sermon – August 16, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

“Tell me about a complicated man. / Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost / when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy.”

That is the first line from Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of *The Odyssey*, which Christopher Nolan used in his recent movie by the same name. *The Odyssey*—and *The Iliad*, the predecessor book on the Trojan War itself—are ancient Greek epic poems attributed to Homer, composed around the 8th century BCE and were about events 400 years before that.

Many of you, like me, likely read them in high school or college. Thanks to Christopher Nolan's movie, there is a resurgent interest in *The Odyssey*. Like many of you, I had the pleasure of seeing the movie—and for once in a theater, as opposed to later on Netflix.

In the story the “complicated man” (as Emily Wilson translated it) is Odysseus and is about his ten-year journey home after the Trojan War. I'm not going to give away any movie spoilers—but I will say the story is 3,000 years old, so don't be saying to yourself, “Aw, and I was going to read the 500-page book tonight.”

As you probably know, Zeus was the chief god in Greek mythology. While through modern eyes, Zeus is often seen as abusive and chaotic, the ancient Greeks viewed him as the embodiment of divine law and justice and who maintained order in the universe.

Part of that role was being Zeus Xenios, literally “Zeus, the protector of strangers.” In English we have the word “xenophobia” with almost the opposite meaning of fear or hatred of strangers, particularly foreigners.

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In the movie a key theme repeated is “Zeus’s Law” referring to how strangers should be treated. The book also has the same theme but calls it *xenia* (that is, x-e-n-i-a).

Xenia does not have a single, direct equivalent word in English. It is most accurately translated as a combination of three concepts: hospitality, guest-friendship, and ritualized courtesy.

Historically, hospitality towards foreigners and guests was understood as a moral obligation, as well as a political imperative. Hospitality towards foreigners honored Zeus.

The rituals of hospitality created and expressed a reciprocal relationship between guest and host expressed in both material benefits (e.g. gifts, protection, shelter) as well as non-material ones (e.g. favors, certain normative rights.) Violating *xenia* was to incur divine as well as human wrath.

This was true not only of the ancient Greeks but throughout the region. In the ancient Near East nomadic and tribal survival in the harsh desert completely relied on mutual trust, so hospitality to a traveling stranger was not an option but a requirement. Betrayal was considered an ultimate, unforgivable crime.

This extended to Israel. We heard the story a few weeks ago when Abraham welcomed traveling strangers and they revealed he would have a son.

As Leviticus 19:34 says in the Revised Standard Version, “The stranger (or foreigner) who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Today’s Old Testament passage from Isaiah 56 speaks to this.

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Isaiah 56 begins what many scholars describe as “Third Isaiah.” This collection of prophetic oracles through the end of the book was likely compiled in the late sixth to early fifth century BCE after the return from exile in Babylon.

This is around the same time as Ezra, the prophet, and Nehemiah, the governor. Despite these three books being written about the same time, they offer contrasting answers to the question of who belongs to Judah. Ezra 10:2–4 suggests that the removal of foreigners is necessary for God’s favor and national prosperity. In contrast, Isaiah 56:7 announces not only that foreigners are welcome in the political entity of Judah, but also that they can participate in the cultic life of the nation.

Here, foreigners are not a problem to be solved or removed. Rather, the presence of foreigners is evidence of a divine promise fulfilled.

According to Isaiah 56:6–8, the openness of the community to all who “love the name of the LORD” (verse 6) is a hallmark of the postexilic nation. This new nation is no longer defined primarily by genealogy or geography. Instead, the nation consists of all dispossessed who “join to the LORD” and obey the LORD’s commandments.

For the writers of Isaiah 56, admission into God’s community is contingent upon a few ethical rather than ethnic requirements.

In fact, in verse 1 the Lord commands that the faithful members of the community must “maintain justice and do what is right.” Throughout the Bible, justice and righteousness are often linked as foundational elements of God’s reign and the hallmarks of a blessed individual.

While not in our lectionary, I added verses 3 to 5 in the reading dealing with eunuchs (castrated males) and foreigners. These were two classes

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of people who were previously excluded from the community. These verses are likely a direct response to Deuteronomy 23:1-6, which denied access to “the assembly of the LORD” to such people. And Nehemiah 13:1-3 appeals specifically to these laws as warrant for the continued exclusion of ethnic non-Jews from the post-exilic community.

Isaiah’s inclusion of these marginalized groups isn’t just a token nod to diversity. Their envisioned participation in the worshiping community is full and robust. Not only are eunuchs allowed into the temple, but, as verse 5 says, God offers them permanent memorials there to compensate for their lack of descendants to carry on their names.

And God doesn’t wait for devout foreigners to find their way to the temple (the “if you build it, they will come” approach). Rather, God “will bring (them) to my holy mountain.” Their prayers and sacrifices will be accepted, and their worship will be “joyful” (verse 7). In the final verse of the passage (verse 8), God promises to continue bringing new people into the community.

Note that in all these verses, God does not explicitly require anything of the nation of Judah. In fact, the verses underscore that God is in charge. God’s people are to do what God calls them to do because of what God is doing. Both “justice” and righteousness have to do with relationships. The people are to respond to God’s gracious acts by developing and maintaining a sound relationship with God. Developing and maintaining sound relationships with other people goes hand-in-hand with a sound relationship with God.

As verse 1 says, God’s deliverance is not about conquering the enemy.

Deliverance here is not revenge on enemies or fame and fortune or

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assurances that nothing bad will ever happen again. Instead, this deliverance is revealed in terms of intimacy with God, in terms of prayer.

Deliverance looks like dwelling together in God’s own house with joy.

Today’s gospel passage from Matthew 15 resonates well with Isaiah 56.

In the first story Jesus points out that it is what you say and do to others that defiles you rather than ritualistic practices, echoing Isaiah of mercy, justice, and doing right over following the letter of the law.

The second story underscores God’s inclusive welcoming of all. A faithful foreign woman, who called Jesus “Lord” and “Son of David”, forces Jesus to rethink his own narrow conceptions of the boundaries of God’s people. Just because Jesus’ mission was first to his Jewish brothers and sisters doesn’t mean he has to ignore the stranger. It can be a “both/and” rather than “either/or”, which he sees in the end. And, for the only time in the New Testament, commends a person for their “great faith.”

In *The Odyssey* and, frankly its predecessor, *The Iliad*, virtually all the major conflicts stem directly from failures of *xenia*, either as the root catalyst for suffering or the moral justification for violent retribution.

The same is true today. Imagine how much better things would be if we practiced hospitality, guest-friendship, and common courtesy with all? Or maintained justice and did what is right as the LORD commanded in Isaiah? Or accepted LGBTQ+ and immigrants as the LORD said in Isaiah to do for eunuchs and foreigners? What a wonderful world it would be! In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.