

March 14, 2004
Third Sunday of Lent
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God's Price-less Love

Isaiah 55:1-9 *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.*

God's call through Isaiah sounds like the call of the sellers in the marketplaces of the prophet's day. Come, see what I have! Come, buy my wares! Lovely figs and fresh-baked bread. Nourishing milk and finest wines. We hear such calls every day from newspaper, radio, television, and computer screen. All of the things that we can buy, all offering some fulfillment, some meaning for our lives. We are invited to pay a price for something that promises to enhance our lives, make us feel good about ourselves, or increase our sense of security. They are appeals to our appetites, physical, emotional, even spiritual, offering to satisfy our deepest hunger and thirst.

There's something very different, however, about this call that comes from God. After getting our attention—come, buy, eat and drink—God says, “Don't bring your money! You won't need it. It is free for the taking.” What God offers is truly price-less—a fresh, new relationship with God. The one thing that truly, deeply satisfies is offered absolutely free. If we are spending our energies, resources, and time pursuing things that don't really bring fulfillment, then in Isaiah's words we are working for things that don't satisfy, for bread that is not really bread. The finest wine, the richest food, the real bread is God and the spiritual dimension of our lives in which we seek and nourish our relationship with God. And it's all absolutely free, says Isaiah.

With these rich images Isaiah is speaking of God's grace, the free offer of a relationship with God that depends on nothing we have or don't have. God's love for us has no strings attached and isn't based on whether or not we feel

worthy or good enough. This beautiful chapter of Isaiah shows us that at the heart of scripture is God's grace. It is God's very nature to offer us again and again that which fulfills us and lends purpose and meaning to our lives. The call is always there, only to be heard and answered. The invitation is present in every moment, only to be accepted.

“Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” These words assume that each of us has the capacity to listen to God, to turn our hearts and minds toward God. We are made to “be still and know that God is God,” as Psalm 46 puts it. The practices of silence, meditation, and prayer that are fundamental to what we call the “inward journey” are the exercising of this God-created ability to live from the center where we hear God's voice, where we receive God's words of life, and where we are in communion with God. What is our life in Christ but the sharing of his life, which was fully in communion with and centered in God?

In the congregation I served before coming here, we began a program of worship for children called “Children Worship & Wonder.” My wife Kaye has developed this program for the Disciples of Christ denomination. It is based upon the work of Sofia Cavaletti, a Catholic laywoman in Italy who studied with Mari Montessori. At the heart of this program is the assumption that children already have a relationship with God. All they need is the space in which they can explore and deepen that relationship, and the sacred stories of faith that touch their spirits and inspire their wonder.

In our congregation were several children with conditions that made it very difficult for them to be quiet and attentive. How would they respond, we wondered, to an environment that asked them to be quiet and reflective, to be in touch with their own inner life? What we found should not have surprised us. These children were able to sit quietly, listening to the stories, entering into the prayers, and responding to what they were hearing, thinking, and feeling. When given an environment of acceptance, of respect for their relationship with God, in which they are invited into the quietness and creativity of their own spirits, these and all the

children had no problem coming to the waters of God's presence and love.

God's call invites us to let go of everything that distracts us from what truly feeds our spirits and gives us life. The many voices calling us to buy and consume countless things that don't bring life. The voices within us telling us we are not good enough. The experiences of the past that keep us locked in anger, hurt, or dissatisfaction with ourselves, other people, and life itself. Isaiah's words call us to that eternal Moment always at hand when we can begin life on a new plain, at a deeper and more real level, when we can begin to live again from a quiet center where we know God and the grace of God's love that accepts us as we are and leads us on from there.

When we take time for silence each day, when we make that commitment to practice inward stillness and listening, we are turning toward the real bread, the truly nourishing source of life. We stop running from ourselves and the inner chaos that has built up in us. We stop looking to everyone and everything around us to bring us satisfaction, to meet our needs, and start drawing from the wells of our own spirits, where we meet God. When each of us is working with this, when we are all making these efforts to live from the inside out, no matter how faltering or minimal, we are creating a community that is truly open to God's spirit and love, a community that is transparent to God's presence and purposes. To the extent that each of us is grounding our lives in this kind of prayer, this kind of listening and turning to God, we will be a community of peace among ourselves and toward the world around us.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Is Isaiah now saying something contradictory? First he sounds God's call for us to turn from what are not God's ways and to seek God's ways. Then we hear that God's thoughts and ways are so far above us or beyond us that it seems impossible for us to connect with them. What do we do with this?

I don't think that anyone who has ever been caught up in the call of God in Christ has escaped the feeling of being involved in something way bigger than what we can accomplish or understand. The Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann translates this the "plans and designs" of God. God's plans and designs are not ours. But this doesn't mean that we give up or collapse into an attitude of "Well, since we can't really know God's plans and designs, there's no use doing anything." I think the opposite is true. God's call that ground us in God's grace opens us up then to being participants in God's plans and designs insofar as we can perceive them. Our "thoughts and ways," our "plans and designs" come under the purposes of God. This is where prayer, contemplation, silence unfold into what God is calling us to do, how God is inviting each of us to spend our lives for the sake of this world.

This passage from Isaiah can speak of us of the life of prayer and action, the inward journey and the outward journey. We are called to come to the waters of life, the bread of God and God's love for us. This is first and foremost. The inward journey is foundational to our lives. Out of this first movement toward God at the center of our lives, we are then immersed in the plans and designs, the thoughts and ways of God. We begin to see that the God who calls us to be enfolded in divine love is the God who then makes us part of what God is doing and wants to do through us for the world.

The last part of our reading from Isaiah is a benediction or blessing upon us as we give ourselves to prayer and faithful service in the world. Isaiah says that God's living word, God's divine energy and power that calls forth life, will be like the rain and snow. They fall upon the earth bringing forth life and sustenance. Like the rain and snow and the sure effects they bring to the earth, so God's living word will accomplish everything God desires for us and the world. Here is a word of assurance, of confidence. When we are partaking of the life and love God offers us freely, and when we are living out of that quiet and true center of our being, as big as the work is we feel called to do, as impossible as it seems, it will be accomplished. We will be a part of God's renewal of the world, often in ways that we may never see or know.