

March 7, 2010/Third Sunday of Lent/David L. Edwards

Invitation to Life

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.*

Isaiah sounds God's call like that of 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. We are urged to purchase something that promises to enhance our lives, make us feel good about ourselves, or increase our sense of security. And since we are conditioned by our culture to seek something outside of ourselves to fulfill our lives, we take the bait. We pay the price, but it never satisfies, at least for very long.

There's something very different about this call from God. After getting our attention—come, buy, eat and drink—God says, "Don't bring your money! Your money is no good here. It is free for the taking." God offers an invitation to life itself, to life as we were made to live it, and there is no price tag. It is the one thing that truly, deeply satisfies, and it is absolutely free. If we are spending our energies, resources, and time pursuing things that don't really bring fulfillment, or if we are going about life as though we have to earn it or always be achieving something, 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 opening up to and nourishing our relationship with God. And it's all absolutely free, says Isaiah.

A life lived on the basis of God's love for us has no strings attached. It is not something to be achieved or merited. We can't earn it or ever really lose it. It is not "out there," but "in here", only asking our awareness and affirmation. This beautiful chapter of Isaiah shows us that 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. It reminds me of the story about the fish that swims up to another fish. "Can you tell me where the ocean is?" asked the fish. "I have been looking all over for it because it sounds so wonderful." How can you tell the fish that the ocean is already there, all around? To me, that is the sense of this invitation to life that we find in Isaiah 55.

"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, where we are simply aware of life in its relationship to God. When we talk about our lives being "in Christ," it means that we share his life, which was fully in communion with and centered in God.

Kaye has worked nearly fifteen years to help congregations across the country provide Children Worship & Wonder programs for their children. We have a CW&W program here, in which Dolly and Kaye are the main story tellers. It is a program of worship for children based upon the work of Sofia Cavaletti, a Catholic laywoman in Rome who was influenced by the educational insights and methods of Maria Montessori. The program assumes that children already have a relationship with God. What 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. Adults who work with this program have found that by being with children in this way, their own spiritual lives have been awakened and deepened.

When given an environment of acceptance, respect for their relationship with God, and in which they are invited into the quietness and creativity of their own spirits and their own relationship with God, children have little 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 consume countless things that don't bring life. The voices within us telling us we are not good enough. Experiences of the past that we hang onto, keeping ourselves locked in anger, hurt, or dissatisfaction with ourselves, other people, and life itself. A culture that breeds into us an insatiable appetite for more possessions, more money, more experiences, more of this or that. Isaiah's words call us to that eternal Moment, always at hand, in which we can open to life on a new and deeper 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 make time for silence each day, when we commitment to practicing 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, fed by a frenzied culture. We stop looking to everyone and everything around us to meet our needs, demanding that the world and other people be as we want them to be. We start drawing from the wells of our own spirits, where we meet God. When each of us is working with this, making the effort 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. If each of us is grounding our lives in this kind of prayer, this kind of listening, and opening to God and to life, we become a community of peace in and among ourselves, and for the sake of 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." The biblical scholar Claus Westermann translates this the "plans and designs" of God. God's plans and designs are not ours. When we respond to the call of God in Christ to live this new kind of life, we will, sooner or later, become aware that we are involved in something way bigger than what we can accomplish or understand. Mystery, wonder, humility -- these are hallmarks of true spirituality. This doesn't mean that we collapse into an attitude of "Well, since we can't really know God's plans and designs, there's no use doing anything." The opposite is true. God's call that grounds us in God's grace opens us up to being participants in God's plans and designs insofar as we can perceive them. Our "thoughts and ways," our "plans and designs" become part of the greater, deeper purposes of God. We begin to look for and perceive how our small lives "fit" into the whole fabric of life. This is where prayer, contemplation, and silence help us become aware of what God is calling us to do, how God is inviting each of us to spend our lives for the sake of this world.

Isaiah 55 is at the top of my list of favorite biblical passages, itself a spiritual feast. This week it seemed clearer to me that the whole passage is an invitation to life. It also dawned on me that the spiritual life itself is simply our response to this invitation. It is not about achieving something. It is not about "making progress," though, if we are fairly faithful in our work with an intentional spiritual life, we will experience good changes in ourselves. The spiritual life is not about accumulating esoteric knowledge, or becoming proficient in biblical, theological, or spiritual studies. I am not sure whether to be heartened or fearful that we now have advanced academic degree programs in "spirituality". The spiritual life is not about becoming an "expert" on spirituality. It is simply this: Coming to the feast of life that God is constantly offering, without price, without our having to have the proper credentials. God's invitation to life as a feast is all around us, all the time. All we have to do is stop, quiet ourselves, open our eyes, minds, and hearts, and receive. To me the spiritual life is very simple. Simple to understand. Not simple or easy to do! All of us have been conditioned in ways that make it hard for us to respond to life as a gift, to God's love as having no price tag on it, to the notion that we already have what we most need and seek. What we need to do is open up to it, live from the inside out. It is not easy, but we can do it.

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.