

March 3, 2013 / 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.*

Luke 13:6-9 *“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard;
and he came looking for fruit on it and found none....”*

In order to express the inexpressible fullness of God's love, Isaiah gives God the voice of a seller 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 voices like this every day from newspaper, radio, television, and computer screen. They urge us to buy something that promises to enhance our lives, make us feel good about ourselves, or increase our sense of security, and mostly things we don't need whatsoever. We are conditioned by our culture to believe that our happiness and fulfillment has to do with something outside of us, and so we take the bait. We pay the price, but it never satisfies, at least for very long.

These words arose sometime toward the end of Israel's exile in Babylon. A new day was beginning to dawn, and the long night was coming to an end. The prophets interpreted the Exile as the consequences of the people and their leaders having abandoned their relationship with God for the gods of power, wealth, military might, as well as substituting institutional religion for faithful living. We hear this voice of God's invitation to life and love when we reach the end of all that we have tried and found wanting and empty, when we are ready for a new start.

This voice is different from every other voice. After getting our attention—come, buy, eat and drink—we hear, “Don't bring your money! Your money is no good here.” This is an invitation to life as we were made to live it. 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 think we have to earn life or always be achieving

something, then in Isaiah's words, we are working for bread that is not really bread. The finest wine, the richest food, the real bread is life in its relationship with God. All we have to do is open up to life in its sacred dimension, which is love. Life is, first of all, about our capacity to receive. It is not about something "out there" but "in here".

This beautiful chapter of Isaiah shows that the heart of scripture is God's grace—ever-present, unconditional steadfast love. The Source and Energy and Power of life itself—which we call God—offers us again and again that which fulfills us, that lends purpose, meaning, and joy to our lives. The call is always there, only to be heard and answered. It is like 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 created to "be still and know that God is God," as Psalm 46 puts it. The practices of silence, meditation, and prayer are fundamental to what we call the "inward journey". They are simply the exercising of this God-created ability to live from the center where we have awareness, where we are in touch with life in its sacred dimension.

Kaye worked sixteen years to help congregations across the country provide Children Worship & Wonder programs for their children. We have a CW&W program here, which Kaye, Dolly, and Evi are ready to lead whenever we have a child or children present for worship. It is based upon the work of Sofia Cavalletti, 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. We don't need to put it in them. What they need is the space in which they can explore and deepen that relationship, listening and responding to 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. They have no problem with life as pure gift. This is what Jesus was talking about when he taught that little children already know what the kingdom, or realm, of God is about; it belongs to them. And Jesus called us to be like them. We can do it. We have it in us.

Our challenge as adults is that through the years we have taken on all the distractions and illusions that have been fed us. They teach us to look outside ourselves for what is fulfilling, and for the measure of our own lives. God's call invites us to let go of the inward and outward distractions from what truly feeds our spirits and gives us life. The voices calling us to consume countless things that don't bring life. The voices of others we have taken into ourselves, telling us we are not good enough. Experiences of the past that we hang onto, keeping us 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 relationships, more attention, 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, where we know we have all that we need.

When we make time for silence each day, when we commit 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 life 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 Jesus 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 itself a spiritual feast. The whole passage is an invitation to life. I think we could see the spiritual life as simply our response to this invitation. It is not about achieving something. It is not about “making progress,” though, if we are faithful in our work with an intentional spiritual life, we will experience good changes in ourselves. It takes time and patience. 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.

One last thing. The reading from Luke’s gospel sounds very harsh over against the sublime words of Isaiah. If the tree doesn’t bear fruit, it gets cut down. Jesus was talking about people who partake of God’s love only to turn it into legalism or privilege or status or power. They are not producing the fruits of God’s love in its dimensions of compassion, justice, and peace. Bearing fruit means becoming channels of God’s love as it touches the life

of the world through our callings and gifts. There is nothing more urgent than coming to the waters of God's love, of life as utter gift, and living our lives out of that love and freedom. It isn't a matter of a God "up there" punishing us if we don't. It is a matter of truly finding and living what life is about. Once we begin to root our lives in the grace of God's love, we will bear fruit. We can't help it. We will begin to see the ways we can make our lives, our gifts manifestations of God's love. The importance of being on that journey has about it a sense of urgency.

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 also makes us part of what God is doing and wants to do through us for the world.