

All that Money Can't Buy
Isaiah 55

World Communion Sunday/17th Sunday after Pentecost/ 2nd October 2022

Isaiah wastes no time and gets right to the point. How did your perspective get so skewed? How did your values become so misplaced? How did your attitudes become so twisted, distorted, and warped? How? Or, deeper, *why*?

Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread?
Why do you labor for that which does not satisfy?
Why do you invest your life in that which does not feed your life?
Why do you exert energy and waste time on that which does not satisfy your soul?

Isaiah is calling Israel—calling us—to a time of honest soul-searching. Now is the time to take stock of what matters and what doesn't. Now is the time to reevaluate how we live, invest, and spend resources. Now is the time to question our values. It's a time to listen to our hearts, be attentive to the soul, give up surface living and go deep. Isaiah calls Israel to conduct a moral exam, a season of self-examination to take stock of their lives. And in love, with grace, Isaiah asks them:

Why are you sabotaging yourselves?
Why are you undermining yourselves, saying that you want one thing, but go after another?
Why are you looking for love in all the wrong places?
Why are you striving after that which will only leave you disappointed?

Isaiah's questions are all rhetorical. He's not asking because he doesn't know the answers. He's posing the questions to move the argument forward, to make a point, and to cause the listener to stop and consider. He's not waiting for Israel to answer. The answers are contained in Isaiah's questions.

Israel's search for something, striving after something, and expending a lot of money, time, and effort in the process, suggests that Israel is missing something at its core. There's a desire and hunger at work here that cannot be satisfied, gratified, or fulfilled. It's that *hunger* and *thirst* that Isaiah wants them to be attentive to. He wants them to feel the depth of their hunger, to feel the depth of their desire.

For what do you *really* hunger? For what do you *really* thirst? What do you truly desire? These are critical questions because our hungers and thirsts and desires inevitably push, move, direct us down one road or the other, one way or the other. We could say, then, that Isaiah is inviting them to consider what's really driving their lives, to name what they're hungry for, thirsty for. These are questions we need regularly ask ourselves. They're essential for the journey. What's really driving you? What's really motivating you?

Isaiah cries to them, "Ho, everyone who thirsts"—or as we would say in New Jersey, "Yo!" "Yo, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters," thus extending the invitation to all of us

(Isaiah 55:1). The invitation stands: the water of life is here. But do you thirst for it? Or are there other thirsts? Are you thirsty for *this* water? Do you desire it? Long for it? Dream about it? Can we acknowledge what's missing in our lives? Can we name what we crave? Is it the hunger for God?

It's important to remember this essential wisdom running through scripture: need, want, and lack are all required in the life of faith. Need, want, lack. If you think you're self-sufficient, need nothing, want for nothing, or lack nothing, then don't be surprised if God seems absent or unnecessary. There's a direct correlation between wealth and self-sufficiency and the decline of faith, particularly in North America and Western Europe. There is a direct correlation between the rise of secularism and the growth of enormous wealth in the West. For the past two weeks, we explored challenging parables from Luke in which Jesus warns us against serving money and wealth instead of God (Luke 16:1-13), where Jesus warns us against disordered affections (Luke 16:19-31). The rise in soul-crushing materialism, particularly since the early eighteenth century, along with the cult of consumerism, has undermined our ability to be open to the Spirit and to religious dimensions of reality. We put too much trust in matter, in money, and all that can be gained or achieved through them.

But we need reminders, sometimes daily, that there are things that money cannot buy. Our obsession with material things will not fill our hearts with joy. We are at the mercy of forces and powers beyond ourselves. All we own can be swept away, washed away by rising waters or the winds of war. Our lives are not really our own. We do not belong to ourselves. We are wholly dependent upon God.

The life that Isaiah offers to God's people doesn't come through us or from within us; it doesn't come from what we can buy or because we've earned it; we don't own it. What we're really looking for, hungry for, and need cannot be found in what we have or from what we find within ourselves. We have to acknowledge our poverty, that we are *poor*. We can't buy what God freely gives to us. You don't need money for this. Your money is no good here. We don't have the currency to obtain it. What we need is our poverty, to confess what we lack, to acknowledge that we are in need of grace. Didn't Jesus say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). In Matthew, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Isaiah says, "You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1).

And so Isaiah calls them to acknowledge their *impoverishment* and recognize their need for God; he reminds them of God's covenant with them and invites them back. "Seek the LORD while he may be found...let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy..." (Is. 55:6-7). Seek and return.

But, still, there's a nagging question embedded in this text. What keeps them—keeps us—from accepting this gracious invitation? Why does Isaiah have to remind and encourage Israel? Shouldn't they already know the generosity of God? Shouldn't they already live this life that Isaiah is inviting them to? Shouldn't we?

We all need these reminders. We all forget what we know—which is a good definition of sin. One of my professors at seminary said, “Sin is forgetfulness.” When we forget God’s grace and all that we know about God, when we forget who we are, we sin, and we fall—again and again. And thus, we need help remembering what is always true. We all go astray, every one of us, and we need to be brought back home—which is a good definition of grace.

On this World Communion Sunday, when we are uniquely conscious of the body of Christ, the global body of Christ, we are reminded that we are not isolated individuals but part of a community of Christ’s people, interconnected and interdependent. We turn to this meal, to this feast. No one can afford to buy the bread and wine that Christ offers us here. It is freely given. We are not the hosts but honored guests. We are invited to acknowledge our poverty, to come to the table with our hunger, our desire, with empty hands, all that we lack, to receive God’s grace. Let us gather around the table, break bread, share the cup, and remember again the grace that makes us whole, binds us together, fills us, and then sends us out with joy and peace.



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

