

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

August 6, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Sam Wolff

First Lesson (Isaiah 55: 1-5)

“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.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
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.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander
for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”

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The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 14: 13-21)

Now when Jesus heard [about the beheading of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The Gospel of our Lord.

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning, Isaiah calls to us, “*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. Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and you labor for that which does not satisfy?*” *Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good.*”

A few years ago, I was sitting with a very close friend who had also been a missionary in Africa. In fact, we went over together many years before that, he as a medical missionary and me as a pastor. And I was with him for the first time since he had buried his twenty-year-old son, who died of a brain tumor. It was a difficult time. And as I sat with him, mostly in silence, after awhile he said, "Sam, do you remember how we used to love the feast in Africa? Even if there wasn't much to eat, just some beans or rice, some tea." And, of course, I knew that fellowship that comes together. Then he said something I'll never forget. He said, "Sam, since I have been back to the states, I discovered something. The opposite of feast is not famine. The opposite of feast is fast food. And the opposite of life is not death. The opposite of life is life without meaning."

This is not going to be a message about the evils of fast food. Heavens knows I enjoy my mine. But when you think about what my friend said and think about this difference, this opposite, feast and fast food. Fast food is, to start off with, is mostly something that we do by ourselves. It's ironic that we do it by ourselves, usually in a very crowded place. But fast food you eat at different times, in different places, with different people. And fast food is generally, unless you get a bucket of fried chicken, it's basically passed to one individual, because there is no encouragement, no reason to share. You can eat at any time and any place. You either can stand, sit, or walk, or even drive. And I think one of the most appealing things about fast food is that there is no investment. It's cheap. It's readily available. But you really don't have to give anything of yourself.

Feast is truly the opposite of that. With feast, one has to invest, invest a lot. No matter how humble the fare is, you have to give of yourself. And it's a two-way thing. The guest also has to give, give their time, give their attention, give their relationship, during the feast. But it's worth it; we all know that. There is a joy in feast that simply isn't present in a Chicken McNugget. There is a relationship; there is a connection that you're making, all of us together as the people of God.

And yet I wonder sometimes if in our culture fast food has indeed replaced feasting. And if that happens, life, I think, ceases to have as much meaning. If we somehow lose that part of us that wants to feast with other people, then we have become a bit less of what God intended for us.

The text from Isaiah this morning speaks to that, because Isaiah calls, invites, not only thousands of years ago the people then but us this morning, to a feast, a feast that may seem strange to us who have so much. Because it's strange we're invited to this feast, and to buy milk and wine without money, without cost. Leave your purses; leave your wallets at home. Just come to the feast.

Isaiah spoke these words thousands of years ago to a people who were in captivity. They were in exile, and they had been for many years. But it's a bit misleading. They were in exile, but they weren't really in bondage. They had been there through generations, and so they lived their lives pretty much like the local people did, pretty much like the homeland they had left, even though they longed to return.

But as the years passed, these people who had been called by God began to lose their faith and invest in the riches of the new country. They began to leave God and seek

material wealth, turned their focus towards things rather than towards God. Creating new idols of worship and trampling on the poor. They had turned away from the feast when they passed through the Golden Arches and towards that spiritual fast food. Things that satisfy the body but destroy the soul. They accepted the bangles of the day; all those pretty things that were made out of things, and turned away from life, into what became life without meaning.

When Isaiah spoke these words, the water and the wine, of course, were symbols. But Isaiah was reminding them these are symbols of the blessings of God, and the blessings of God are free. They cannot be purchased at any price. Thus Isaiah invited them to come to a feast, which is set in faith. *“Come,”* he says, *“buy and eat. Come, buy milk and wine without money and without price.”*

How do we hear those words this morning? Do they even mean anything? We’re not captives. We try to live life as God intended. But I think we hear these words as we are called even to a closer relationship not only to God but with one another. And not only the one another who are sitting here this morning, but a call to be closer to the one another who aren’t here as well.

When I was thinking and working on this sermon, the image of Mary and Martha, when Jesus was invited to their house, do you remember that? I kept thinking about that. And the difference is so clear there between feast and fast food. Martha was running around making sure everything was absolutely right, the table set properly, the house swept. She was running around doing what any good hostess probably should be doing. Mary did nothing. Mary sat with Jesus, quietly listening, responding; having a relationship with our Lord. And Jesus looked at this. He said, “Martha, no. No, Martha. What you’re doing is just preparing fast food. Mary, who is sitting with me, she is truly at the feast.”

God calls all of us to buy milk and wine without cost. In our world, which we separate the rich from the poor, we have to remember that God’s blessings are for all. All are welcomed. Everyone is welcomed at this wonderful banquet. God’s blessings have no boundaries. All are welcomed in God’s kingdom, rich and poor alike, for those who have millions and those who have nothing. Everyone is included. With the invitation, there are always four little letters at the bottom of the invitation — “R.S.V.P.” — because invitations invite a response.

How do we respond to the invitation that Christ has issued to us this morning, that Isaiah put out to the people so many years ago, what is our response? I think our response comes in the way we worship, the way we live our life, in the choices we make or don’t make. I think our response comes by challenging us to look at the world differently. Look at people without judging.

Last Sunday, if you saw a little activity around here, I had forgotten my glasses, and as I went into the service when I realized that. So I found Ann, who was luckily sitting on the end of the pew. I said, “Here, take my keys. Would you go into my office and see if my glasses were there?” And they weren’t. But then I remembered I probably left them

in the sacristy, and they were. But my point is, had they not been found, I would have been looking totally differently. That happens. We all look at things differently on what we have, the way we see. And I think it gives us an invitation to see the world differently and look at other people, how they live, how we can relate to them.

We respond to this invitation by continuing to walk with our God as he walks with us. I think it's very important, too, yet again today, I think at least three or four times in the short time I've been here, one of the Lessons, if not several of them, have included the word "listen." "Listen carefully," Isaiah said, so that you might live and respond to this invitation by taking the time in our lives to listen to what God is telling us.

In a few minutes we all are going to be invited to the ultimate feast. But, you know, if you put that tiny piece of bread and the miniscule cup of wine on a table, it looks like a famine. But how deceiving that is. Because when that is combined by the Word and promises of God it becomes a feast unimaginable. It's a great feast, a feast of love and forgiveness. It's a place where we will come this morning.

Come to the waters. We will come with no money. We will come broken and humble and in need of forgiveness. And there we can eat and buy without money, without cost, for God has given it all to us.

Amen.