

An Open Invitation

Isaiah 55:1-2, 6-7

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My mother began her book about Japan with a story ripped from the headlines. The headline read “Young Couple Die in Suicide Pact.”

Two university students had fallen in love and—as was the custom—asked permission of both their families to be married. Permission was denied because the girl was from royal blood and the boy was a commoner. Either family would have been embarrassed by the union.

Eventually the two lovers decided to run away to the Amagi mountains south of Tokyo. They rented a room and planned to consummate their relationship without a wedding, but they could not bring themselves to lower their traditional moral standards. They felt it would tarnish their love.

So they saw only one solution. If they could not live together, they would die together. They bought medicine to take in their hotel room. On their last day on earth they decided to hike in the beautiful mountains. As it happens, the Japanese Baptists have a camp in the Amagi mountains, and this couple passed the camp. Near the entrance to the camp is a small fountain for drinking, created from a crystal-clear mountain spring that was walled up with native stone. Carved on the stone are the words Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.

We know that the couple saw the fountain because the last thing the girl did on earth was to write in her diary. She expressed her frustration and despair, explained why they reached the decision to die, and she talked about their final walk together. She told about seeing the fountain, and one of the last things she wrote was “What could it have meant, ‘the water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life’?” [Ida Nelle Hollaway, *Punching Holes in the Darkness*, Broadman, 1978]

Many walk by the water of eternal life with no idea what it is, what it means. The promise that when Jesus places his life in us life will overflow and leap up like a fountain sounds like religious mumbo-jumbo rather than a real promise that Jesus can offer hope to the hopeless.

That same kind of promise is given in our text from Isaiah 55: “Listen up, all you thirsty people! Come to the waters and drink. Listen up, you hungry people who have no money. Come to me and eat. I am offering you wine and milk for free—the wine that makes your heart glad and the milk that makes you strong are here for free.” The invitation comes from God himself, and he is not speaking of those who are physically hungry or thirsty. God is speaking through the poet in metaphor, and the food he offers is a relationship with God himself—an “everlasting covenant,” he calls it. There *is* a free lunch, God says. Why are you working for things that don’t satisfy? Come to me and be satisfied by me.

When we were very young, we had no need of clocks or goals. We played outside as long as the sun was up. We roamed the fields or threw the ball or wrestled with our siblings until the day was almost done. Then mother would appear at the door shouting “Come and get it!” By that time we were starving and we knew that something good was waiting for us, so we came running. God is that mother, shouting “Come and get it!”

Who is the invitation for? For all God’s children. There are no qualifications except that you are thirsty or hungry. There is nothing you have to bring to the table. You come empty-handed. When we are invited to dinner we always ask, “Can I bring anything?” And God always says “No, just bring yourself.” You do not have to pay anything. There is no cost. It is not just

the righteous who are invited, but the wicked and the unrighteous. All are welcome at the Lord's table, as you are welcome at this Lord's table today. Give up chasing after those things that do not satisfy and begin seeking the Lord while he is making himself available to you—which is to say, *now*.

Jesus turned this invitation into a story (Luke 14:16-23). A rich man gave a great banquet and invited his neighbors, but they began to make excuses. So the host sent his servant out saying, "Invite the poor, the handicapped, the rejected. Invite everyone who has never been invited to a party before. I have prepared a feast and I want my house to be full." That is the God we worship, the God revealed in Jesus. That is the Lord who invited you to this table.

Are you making excuses or are you running to supper? Some of us choose to deny that we are ever hungry, to deny that we are thirsty. To admit it, we think, would mean to admit that we have failed somehow, that the life we have chosen for ourselves is not really working. The biggest problem that the Helping Hands food ministry has is not getting donations; the biggest problem is getting hungry people to admit that they need food. Our human pride, that New England value of self-reliance, keeps us from telling even our own hearts that we are hungry. But Bruce Springsteen was right when he sang "Everybody's got a hungry heart. Everybody's got a hungry heart."

One of the first hymn writers, Isaac Watts, said the same thing in a song based on Isaiah 55 some 273 years before Springsteen:

*Lo! all ye hungry, starving souls
That feed upon the wind,
And vainly strive with earthly toys
To fill an empty mind.
Eternal Wisdom has prepared
A soul-reviving feast,
and bids your longing appetites
The rich provision taste.* ["Let Every Mortal Ear Attend," 1707]

Are you feeding on the wind or trying to fill your mind with earthly toys? Come to the water, come to the feast. If you go out to Arizona where the air is dry and the sun is hot and take a trip to the Grand Canyon, you will see signs on the trail to the bottom that say, "Stop! Drink water. You are thirsty, whether you realize it or not."

All of us are thirsty. All of us need to come to the waters and drink deeply. Jesus said, "Blessed are the thirsty. Blessed are the hungry." Hungry and thirsty for what? "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for a right relationship with God." Those who deny their thirst and hunger are lost, but those who admit their need are blessed. The preacher Stuart Briscoe once said, "God will meet you on the level of your desire. You can have as much of God as you want." Those are the terms of the invitation. If you want me, you can have me, but you must want me. You must come to me.

Those are the terms of the invitation from Jesus. On the last day of the feast of Tabernacles at the temple in Jerusalem, when water was brought in golden pitchers from the pool of Siloam and poured over the altar in the temple, Jesus stood and said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink... Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37 NRSV).

Anyone who is thirsty—the wicked, the unrighteous, anyone. God says, "Let them return to me. Let them change direction from chasing after their own lusts. Let them stop cramming their lives with other things to fill that God-shaped hole in their hearts. Tell them to come to me

not because I am angry but because I am ready to have mercy. I will pardon them abundantly. Mercy will overflow like a fountain.” That is the invitation: not get right before you meet God, but come just as you are because he loves you and he will satisfy your hunger with himself. John Calvin said in commenting on Isaiah’s words, “Man cannot be led to repentance in any other way than by holding out the assurance of pardon.” This is evangelism, Calvin says: not preaching sin—in the words of an old Jackson Browne song, “Don’t confront me with my failures. I have not forgotten them” [“These Days”]—not preaching sin, but preaching mercy.

We are surrounded by the waters of God’s mercy. All we have to do is drink. In the days of the Portuguese exploration of South America one of their ships was becalmed in the waters of the South Atlantic, not going anywhere. They were near the equator, in constant heat. The sailors began to run out of water, but there was no wind to carry them to fresh water. The crew was going to die of thirst. Then a small vessel appeared coming toward them from the mainland. When it came close the captain shouted to them “We have no water!” The men on the little bark shouted back, “Here is water,” scooping up water from the side of the boat. What the thirsty sailors did not know was that the power of the Amazon River is so great that a hundred miles out into the ocean the water is fresh. All the time they were thirsting the sailors were sitting in an ocean of fresh water. All who are thirsty, come to the waters of God’s mercy and drink.”