

“God’s Lenten Feast”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-3a, 6-12

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... Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon God while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 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. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

1 Corinthians 10:1-11, 12-13 *abbreviated*

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did... We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did... We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did... And do not complain as some of them did... If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

What are some of your favorite comfort foods? We humans hunger – for comfort and security – and hunger is the appropriate term. We crave the assurance that things will work out, that we and our loved ones will be okay – especially when life’s challenges seem overwhelming. This hunger is probably one reason that churches – and other faith communities – have so many potluck meals. We’ve learned that when we gather over a meal, it’s not just the food that nourishes us. Hearing somebody else’s story and sharing our own feeds our souls.

I’ve been to countless church potlucks in my life, and – even now, with my crazy dietary restrictions – I always find great things to eat. And the way we feel afterward! Everyone seems to leave in a better mood than we came in. There must be a secret ingredient, wouldn’t you say? Love must be baked in every loaf of bread, hot-dish and dessert, stirred into every salad. And have you noticed how there’s always enough? I remember Camilla sharing a story when Ben was little. They were driving home after church. He was amazed, “Mom, you know. It’s like the loaves and the fishes!”

As faithful folk, we know what satisfies the body. We know what matters and we take it seriously. When someone’s hurting, we bring food. After Bruce’s foot surgery, folks stopped by with food and he knew his church cared. Next month, the SPRC will be hosting a potluck. Many of us will make favorite recipes to bring, all seasoned with love and caring.

Tables heaped with food is not what typically comes to mind when we think of Lent. Lent is fashioned a time of self-denial. A time set apart for fasting from all that is indulgent. A time to remove obstacles which might prevent us from noticing God and letting God work on us. A lively feast at God’s table is the last thing we would expect to encounter in our scripture lessons for this third week of Lent. Yet here we are – invited, no, compelled to come to God’s table. We protest, “I’m not ready!” or “I don’t have the time” or “Really, God? You want me? Now?”

In our Isaiah text today, the people of Israel are at the end of a long exile in Babylon. Even remembrance of the Promised Land had faded from collective memory. The covenant made to

David, if remembered at all, would have seemed more like a dream than a reality.

From what we read, as well as from knowledge of contemporary occupation and exile experiences, we can surmise that the people of Israel were feasting and fasting. Empires – then and now – foster an economy of scarcity. A belief that there is not enough, will never be enough. The people of Israel, like many defeated peoples, accepted the logic of empire. Their feasting was on absence and emptiness, survival and subsistence. Feasting – maybe – but also fasting – from Yahweh's abundant promises and from the assurance that one day God would lead them home.

This fasting apart from God's grace left the people starved of hope and weak of heart. In this weakened state, a call to come to God's table of abundance must have seemed too good to be true. They had been underfed for so long when it came to hope or belief in a better day. The invitation in Isaiah was a call for them to repent – to turn again to God – and to accept God's invitation to delight again in life, to come and buy and eat and drink and listen. And letting go of the restraints that had defined their long fast, to celebrate God's grace and lovingkindness together. This feast is open to everyone.

Barry Beames writes about an experience in his church. Every day, he says, out-of-town visitors would come looking for information about the community, the church, restaurants, and such. One day, just before noon, a family came in. As he talked with them, a couple rushed into the office carrying food to a potluck luncheon. As they all talk, the couple invited the visitors to join them. "There's plenty of food, and you must be starving after your drive. Our menu may be a little different from yours but the food will take care of your craving. After lunch we'll show you around town. Come on. There's a feast waiting on you."

This is the message of today's text – but not just refreshing you after a long drive, Yahweh's feast is described as the answer to our unfulfilled hunger for meaning and significance. God is inviting you to attend this life-fulfilling feast. What holds you back?

Months ago, when I talked about Jesus' parables, I sang a bit of a song. Some of you joined me.

A certain man held a feast on his fine estate in town.
He laid a festive table and wore a wedding gown.
He sent invitations to his neighbors far and wide
but when the meal was ready, each of them replied:

I cannot come, I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now.
I have married a wife; I have bought me a cow.
I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum.
Pray, hold me excused, I cannot come.

What keeps you from accepting God's invitation? Maybe before that, we need to look at what you are feasting on instead of God's grace and love.

When we consider our world, we see a similar type of feasting on scarcity, fear, and distrust that the people of Israel faced. How many candidates how now jumped into the Presidential race? Which one said they were against the death penalty only to vote for it this week? What reports are we still waiting to see, yet wondering if anyone will take action on them? How many children slept under the stars last night because there are too few beds in homeless shelters and too many unsupported mortgages still being given out? How many employers only hire part-time workers to avoid having to pay insurance? And who benefits from insurance companies charging so much that employers need either to hire this way or go out of business?

More personally, how many struggle with a belief that we're not good enough, not worthy of God's loving call on our life? I've struggled with feelings of inadequacy for most of my life. I'm sure it's partly my own personality, but being raised with any kind of strict expectations will contribute to this as well.

I recall after kids' choir rehearsal one Saturday, a couple of us went exploring the new building on the property. I wasn't there when my dad arrived to pick me up. He was upset. Once home, he told me I couldn't go to the show I'd been looking forward to, unless my room was cleaned *perfectly* before it was time to go. I was a flurry of nervous energy and cleaned that room spotless. I thought. When he came to inspect my efforts I was feeling okay until he ran his finger along the window pane. People dust those?! I fled in shame and sadness. Decades later, I suspect he would have relented but whenever I think of my feelings of inadequacy I think of that moment. A counselor once told me he'd like me to paper the walls of my house with the words, "I am good enough."

We all need to.

Through Isaiah and later through Jesus, God invites each of us to let go of whatever holds us back. Whatever keeps us stuffing ourselves on our hurts and disappointments, our cynicism and doubts, our sense of inadequacy and awareness of our shortcomings.

“Stop using your energy and resources on things that will only leave you hungering for more,” God calls. “Call on me. Lean into me. Let me support you. And I will fill you with all that you need so that you can live abundantly. In joy and in celebration. This is what I want for you!”

God’s grace is far more filling than anything in which we have mistakenly put our trust. And while God’s ways of God are not our ways – thank God for that! – God’s way leads us to a time and place where all are welcomed and fed. And are claimed as beloved.

Isn’t this what you want? Isn’t it what you need? This week, find an hour, a moment to accept God’s generous, abundant offer. Set aside other people’s expectations and let your being listen for God. Taste the wholeness God offers you. Sample the peace God extends. Linger over a dessert of rest and quiet joy. Stay long enough to savor it all – and to want to return again for another helping.

Amen.