

Discovering Abundance

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Scripture: [Isaiah 55:1-9](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

Today is our third week of our series on Discovering our Inner Life. Just as early members of the church thousands of years ago prepared for Easter, and thus their baptisms that would be celebrated that night, we are seeking out those parts of our faith life that call us into new identity and life in the Easter story to come. We have been discovering spiritual hunger, God's promise, and today, God's abundance. Reorienting ourselves to live in an understanding of God's rich offer to our lives.

What we call the book of Isaiah is the collection of a few people who wore the moniker of the Prophet Isaiah. The prophet writes in a time of Israel's exile... literally they have been removed from their land, their home, their sense of self and God's presence. The message is of warning and caution in the face of temptations to rely on things outside of God... the promise is the richness and restoration of all creation when we do come to trust in God.

Sermon

There is no small turn that Isaiah takes in our scripture today... it kind of sneaks in... "I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David." God, Isaiah says, is going to make the covenant that was only to King David apply to all of Israel. The cost? Is nothing.

Sometimes, when you're writing, you need something to prime the pump. I knew I wanted to talk to you about work, and what abundance might mean for it today... so I straight up went looking for quotes about work... There was a lot. Most of it from people who were president or wanted to be president... or who were CEO's who had written a book on their way to running for president... none of it sounded as gracious as Isaiah's writing. Mostly, the answer came: 'work hard all the time. When you fail, work hard more. When people look at you, they should see you working hard.'

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for what does not satisfy?

What have you worked **so hard for** that just completely failed to sustain or give life to you? A job, a relationship? The reality is there is so much in our lives that isn't the rich feast that Isaiah tells us God lays out... it's just crumbs that the world has told us we need to scrape and scabble over.

Work is complicated: a never-ending balance of what will sustain us, our families, our communities and societies, and our spirits. This balance is nothing new... Way back in 1891, Pope Leo XIII (13) wrote *Rerum Novarum* seeking to balance the new movements of labor organization, of socialism, and of a global boom of capitalism... Leo sought to underline the inherent dignity of each of us... the inherent dignity that we deserve no matter our labors.

Not all of us will have our experience of work be a wholesome process of self-actualization every day... sometimes you just gotta have a job, and that's always ok. But you should be able to be a *person* with a job as well. There is no one answer of what is "good work". But we might know of bad work... which dehumanizes us, which does not sustain us through fair wages, rest, and health. Which measures our worth through our productivity.

In thinking a little about Patricia's book and the journey through wilderness that she discovered in grief, I realized the many times in my life when I have tried to replace grief with activity. Some of this is good... some of the rituals around grieving: having a service, packing up a house, applying for a new job, whatever the form or kind of grief, some of those activities arise to help us tell the story of what we have lost and what possible future we can see for ourselves. But there are just as many times when we can find ourselves creating to-do lists to paper over the windows of grief or deep movements of the Spirit.

In the past few weeks, I've noticed how much energy and attention the [recent scandal around bribery and college admissions](#) has gotten. A variety of people of wealth and power, inside and outside "elite" universities, used their resources to ensure that certain applicants would get a preferred place in the school, even when their application might not have been very strong, usually through huge sums of money to individuals who would "recruit" the students onto a crew team they never showed up to or something similar. A lot of people have reflected on how much this lays plain the lie of meritocracy in these questions of education and achievement. If one had doubts about the complexity and power of various forms of privilege in our society... well, I would hope this story would cure that.

But I want to say, I am most convicted in this whole scandal by the perversity of the unending quest for achievement in and of itself that has attached itself to our educational systems, and our children, and clearly above all their parents. I guess the question that is most at the top of my mind is, "is this the food which satisfies in life?" Are we creating more and more a sense that the narrow hallways of privilege and achievement are the end of everything we struggle through and for? Access to a life turned inward for ourselves? Or is education meant to be the thing that calls us more deeply to live into who we have been created to be... so much so that our selfness, our unique giftedness, even our work, overflows to participate in the enrichment of all and the banquet of God's gifts to all.

The question of the prophet echoes loud for us today: Are we working for that which sustains... which joins us in the gracious feast? Or are we just working for something hollow? Are our deepest values being lived out in not just what *kind* of work we do, but *how we do it*? Are we valuing the labor of others with a justice equal to God's feast, and valuing the laborers as *priceless*, as God has called them?

Isaiah reminds us today that the comfort and new life we have desperately needed in our lives do not come to us through what we *earn* but from what we learn to find within the dignity and promise which God has created in us. God doesn't work on quotas or productivity, God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. We might extend enough to say God's economy is not our economy. God's spirit forces are not our market forces.

Jesus, too, will underline how much the bounty of nature models God's grace, a table set that you do not need to earn a place at. Every month when we gather at the table to share communion, our invitation to the meal ends the same, with a reminder that to be fed here all you have to *be* is hungry. We need that reminder for ourselves, but we also need to remember that of others... they need not fit any particular category to be deserving of dignity, of grace, of compassion... you don't earn those things, God tells us. We gather ourselves at the table to remember Jesus who showed us the gift of a free and abundant feast of welcome, and the price he was willing to pay for it. So we are challenged to give of ourselves to create the ongoing promise and abundance of God for one another.

How do we value the abundance of life we have been given? That we have to share? Is it ours to store up? Or is it to be spread before all creation as a joyous feast without price? What table shall we set?

May we lead these lives we have as priceless, which welcome the treasures of one another, of all, and of all creation to God's feast.

Amen.