

Labor that Lasts
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 6, 2020-Livestream Service
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Isaiah 55:1-5

These early verses of Isaiah 55 often conjure up for me the image or memory of my family dinner table. Some of you know that for most of my childhood years there were ten of us around that table. It was a place of a whole lot of noise, a place of laughter and tears, teasing and torment, and sometimes even kindness. It was a place where we connected and caught up-albeit in a somewhat chaotic way.

It was also a place where I never doubted that there would be enough food. I don't remember ever wondering, even once, if there would be enough for us to eat. As a way to show love to us and because she could-my mom always made plenty of food for us and more. There were almost always several large pots set right on the table with one of them filled to the brim with mashed potatoes. And there was always enough. There was always enough food for us, and in addition enough for any others who might happen to stop by around dinner time-which surprisingly happened quite often.

I never thought that much about the way my family did dinner until I would eat at my best friend's house. She was a trailer in her family. Her older siblings were essentially out of the house in those years when we rode our bikes all over town and practiced cartwheels in our back yards. But eating dinner at my best friend's house was an entirely different experience. At her house, her mom made exact portions. If there were four of us for dinner there were four potatoes, usually boiled, one already on our plates when we sat down. There were exactly enough vegetables for each of us to have a small portion. The same went for whatever meat was being served. I remember wondering, with a growling stomach, if that seemingly scant amount of food, would really be enough for all of us. What I'd say now is that I was looking at the situation through the lens of scarcity.

We all have a tendency to do that. We all at times operate in life wearing the lens of scarcity. We look at a situation and wonder-will there be enough? Will there be enough help to complete this project? Will there be enough time for me to do all the things I need to do this week? Will there be enough in the budget when Covid 19 gets under control? Do I have enough capacity to meet the needs of the people in my life? Am I smart enough for college? Am I skinny enough to fit in with the cool girls? Am I strong enough to endure what's ahead? Do I have enough faith to please God?

"Do I have enough?" and "Am I enough?" are questions that accompany us throughout our lives-especially in a society that screams scarcity! You see, our world wants to feed those questions and that feeling in you. Nike wants you to believe you don't have enough and that the one who dies with the most shoes wins. L'Oréal hopes you're convinced that only a 'wrinkle-free you' could succeed in gaining friends. The lens of scarcity would have us believe that we are not enough, and that in our world there is not enough to go around. So you'd better buy more, you'd better labor harder, you'd better achieve more, grab as much as you can and do whatever it takes to get you to where you wanna be.

Today, Isaiah's prophetic vision invites us to put on a different lens. And just as it did to the distressed exiles to whom Isaiah preached, Isaiah's prophetic vision meets our society. And it's like a cool breeze in the heat of a barren wilderness. It offers us a glimpse of a different

world, a better world, a world we can see more clearly when we set aside the lens of scarcity and put on the lens of abundance.

Come, says God to all who will listen. Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?

Brothers and Sisters, I hope you hear that invitation as the good news it is because it's a message for all people, for every person who has ever hungered for more-for more time, more money, more security, more strength, more health, more dignity, more faith. The first bit of good news is that God sees you and that God hears the cries of your heart. Secondly, God is calling you to remember-to remember that from the beginning to the end of God's amazing story-there is abundance on every new page-and that abundance is for all. The Bible, the Good News, the story that we love-asserts that we originated in the expansive, inexplicable love of God-who loved this world into generous being. When we celebrate baptism together (as we did this morning) we declare that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God and that because of God's abundant love and grace our lives will also end in God. And nothing can separate us from that indestructible, abundant love.

Turning the page to the New Testament, we see more of God's abundance, as everywhere Jesus goes in his ministry-he keeps demonstrating that God's Kingdom of abundance has entered and is transforming this world of scarcity: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the poor are freed from debt and bondage, the thirsty are given living water and the hungry-bread.

When Jesus took the five little loaves and two fish lunch of a child and fed a multitude of hungry people, Jesus demonstrated that the world, with God in it, is filled with abundance and infused with generosity.

In fact, Jesus demonstrates that the economy of the Kingdom of God is not about limiting, measuring, grasping or hoarding but about unearned, unimaginable goodness and generosity. Not because of our labor, but because of God's unrelenting love and grace.

The prophet Isaiah indicates that God's abundant grace is also for nations and peoples beyond the people of Israel. You see, in God's economy nobody can earn the gifts of God. There's no price tag on the water and wine and milk and bread. They are the gifts of God for anyone who with a grateful heart will receive them. God's abundance cannot be hoarded. It can only be humbly received and shared with those we might be surprised to find at God's table. Which is what I want to think about for the last few minutes of this sermon.

Years ago I read an article in a November Banner, which is a periodical put out by our denomination. The editor encouraged folks as part of their gratitude to God, to invite someone they knew who was poor or someone who was marginalized in society into the circle of those who would be around their Thanksgiving table. His next line said this, "If you don't know anyone that fits that bill then your circle of relationships is too small." What a good challenge-a challenge to be like God in our generosity and like Jesus in who we invite to our table.

Which calls to mind Father Gregory Boyle, who in his wonderful book *Tattoos on The Heart* tells the stories of gang members in LA who Boyle not only works to free from generational poverty and violence, but also grows to love. Boyle, wearing the lens of God's abundance, humanizes these men and women striving for fuller life. Boyle tells the story of an ex-gang member named Lencho, who was essentially tattooed from head to toe. Lencho gets released after serving ten years and cannot find a job. So Father Boyle arranges some work for him (as he has for hundreds of ex-gang members) and Lencho went to work in the silkscreen

factory, which Boyle developed for this purpose. He called Lencho the next day to see how it had gone. Lencho said-full of human dignity, "Yesterday, after work, I'm sittin' at the back of the bus, dirty and tired, and I mean, I just couldn't help myself. I kept turning to total strangers saying "Just comin back, first day on the job." (he turns to another) "Just gettin off-my first day of work." Boyle says "he tells me this, and I can't help imagine the people on the bus-half wondering if mothers are clutching their kids more closely." Yet the other thing that comes to mind for Boyle-are words from the prophet Jeremiah- "In this place, of which you say it is a waste...there will be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness...the voices of those who sing." I pray for eyes and ears like Father Boyle.

God's invitation to come and eat and drink without money, without cost is a gift of generosity beyond our human imagining. All of us who come, come empty handed to receive bread from hands that were pierced for our transgressions and are now raised in blessing toward all who hunger and thirst. And what those hands offer to us is life and hope and forgiveness. And it is more than enough! Thanks be to God! Amen.

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