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Isaiah 55:1-11

“Shouts in the Marketplace”

When I graduated from seminary, I served a church in Zimbabwe for three years, and my parents came to visit me. I remember stopping for gas in a small city, and nearby some women were selling crocheted tablecloths in a roadside market. My mother was out of the car like an Olympic sprinter, calling back over her shoulder, “I’m just going to look.” The women saw my mother approach, and as soon as she pointed to a particular tablecloth and asked to see it more closely, the entire group of ladies was on their feet, displaying their wares, calling out “Madame, Madame” until, when I glanced over, my mother was completely surrounded by a circle of women holding up white crocheted cloths. The women’s cries were relentless, but my mother, like a silkworm in a spinning white cocoon, smiled and waved back at us in that way of hers that meant “I’ll be just a minute.” Eventually we had to go extract her from the market, loading into the car far more placemats, doilies and tablecloths than we would ever need, before heading on our way.

Markets like these exist all over the world. They’re in the souks of Marrakesh and the old city of Jerusalem. They are in narrow side streets in Hong Kong and in German town squares at Christmas time. They are in San Francisco and New York, anywhere vendors can hand you cards or call out to you to just step into their stores for a quick look – special today just for you – prices can’t be beat.

Those images came to mind when I read the opening words of Isaiah 55: *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!* It’s like a marketplace cry to shoppers passing by. Yet it’s a distinctive cry because it invites people to buy and eat without money and without price. I must admit that some weeks I feel like a religious street vendor. Living in a county that contains 150 Presbyterian churches plus scores of other congregations and parishes, sometimes my job feels like I’m supposed to stand on the sidewalk and shout loud enough to lure people into our building. But if that were truly the case, it would mean that we would be evaluating our church by standards of customer satisfaction instead standards of faithfulness. It would mean that we’d become sellers of a product instead of worshippers of God.

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters! Look, the banquet table is before you. Come join our communion feast. There is something profound in Isaiah’s words and in this celebration of the Lord’s Supper. But to speak bluntly: the profundity is lost once the church’s message becomes therapeutic instead of courageous. Our culture is awash with vendors of quick fixes and easy therapeutic answers. Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz – appear on their show, ask your question, hear a quick answer, and all is taken care before it’s time for a commercial break. It is a pervasive formula that can even distort scripture itself. Imagine a talk show host doing a segment on weight loss who then paraphrases the opening verses from Isaiah 55: *Ho, everyone who is thirsty and hungry, struggling to eat right on a budget. Here are some quick tips. Why spend your money on junk that*

doesn't satisfy? How's that working for you? Listen to me, eat what is good. Find delight in quality food, healthy food, and you'll lose weight, be sexier, and feel great. Listen, so that you may live. Did you see how easy that was?

The gospel, though, is not an invitation to therapy; it is a call to courage. Which means if we wish to hear this gospel, we have to really, deeply “hear” it. In the blockbuster movie “Avatar,” humans interact with tall, willowy, blue creatures on the alien planet Pandora. A revealing phrase is spoken whenever two creatures meet. They would look in one another’s eyes and say, “I see you.” The phrase means “I understand you, your heart and motivations and spirit, for good or bad, I see you.” This is a poignant phrase for us today because we live in a visual culture of TV screens, computers, Blackberries, iPhones, and video games. We take in knowledge and decide whether to trust or flee largely based on visual clues. The bible, though, was written during a time when hearing was more important for learning than seeing. People told oral histories, memorized what they heard, made decisions based on what was told them. That’s why Deuteronomy says “Shema” – “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God.” That’s why Isaiah says, “Shema” - “Listen to me; incline your ear; listen so that you may live.” Listen deeply (point to heart). This is where words like covenant, steadfast love, and the eternal Lord make sense and have an impact.

When Isaiah wrote these verses, the people of Israel had been in exile in Babylon for several generations. They were unwanted immigrants, political refugees for the most part. Those who didn’t have readily marketable skills were outsiders: living in slums, ghettos, the parts of the city where good folks don’t go – lacking schools and neighborhood grocery stores and corner banks, places of boarded up storefronts and crackhouses and burnt out street lights and no city renewal funds; you know where I’m talking about. The people were struggling to get by, to pay bills, to hold things together. They needed to hear a message of comfort, so Isaiah called to them right where they were: *You who have no money, come and receive, buy and eat.*

But Isaiah doesn’t just offer cheap grace and quick therapy. He wants us to truly hear what he has to say. When he’s got our attention, he cries out: *Seek the Lord while the Lord may be found. Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts. Return to the Lord, who will have mercy, and to our God, who will abundantly pardon.* It’s never a question of God’s willingness to forgive but always a question of whether we are ready to be forgiven and restored. And that takes honesty and courage. We have to see who we are and what we’ve done without illusion and without self-deception. We have to consider how we spend our lives and labor on things that do not satisfy, how we easily squander the gift of each daily hour on things that diminish life instead of nurturing life.

It takes courage to admit to ourselves, “I am afraid of dying.” It takes courage to admit “I’m afraid of losing my independence. I am afraid of emptiness and meaninglessness in my life, so I fill up my day with activities that pay the bills and pass the time but don’t satisfy. I am afraid of guilt and condemnation, so I keep sins secret, hiding addictions, repressing pain, staying silent even though abused.” Theologian Paul Tillich spoke

about these things as the opposite of life itself, as “non-being.” Faith then is the “courage to be.”

My mentor Dan Maguire, who’s spoken here before, has said, “Courage is love ready to risk. Where there is no readiness to risk there is no love. If we will not risk anything for person- or earth-related causes, we have subordinated everyone and everything to our own safety. Safety, of course, is a value, but not an absolute value.”¹ Are we being safe or are we being faithful? Scripture is not intended for therapeutic promises that keep us safe. Paul stood in the marketplace of Corinth and said, *“If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. You will be tested, but no testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God will not let you be tested beyond your strength.”* Isaiah stood in the marketplace and said, *“All who thirst, come drink. All who have no money, come, buy and eat. This table is from the Lord, who has made with you an everlasting covenant, whose steadfast love is sure. Know that the Lord’s thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are God’s ways your ways. You will be tested; you will be anxious; you will at times doubt and run away and work for that which doesn’t satisfy nor give you true life. But hear this: God says as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth so it may bring forth seeds to the sower and bread to the eater, so God’s word shall not return to the Lord empty. It shall accomplish that which God purposes and succeed in that for which it was sent.*

Courage is simply trust where human needs lie deepest. And in that place, wherever that is for you, God is already there. That is the food offered. That is the love extended. That is the courage to be which we are to take to heart. That is the message of this marketplace. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹ Dan Maguire, The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity, p. 188.