**Introducing the Abundance of God**

**Isaiah 55:1-9
Luke 13:1-9**

 **When it comes time to eat, the staff at the ARC Retreat Center never simply put the food on the table and let it go at that. Help yourselves. They begin by introducing the food, almost as if they are introducing a new guest at the table. Let me introduce you to this vegetable casserole we have prepared. Let me introduce you to this leafy salad. Let me introduce you to this homemade bread. Let me introduce you to the chocolate cake we have for desert. Let me introduce you to this organic tea. Each item is presented by describing the ingredients and the flavors one will soon encounter. You can sense the enthusiasm of the staff at ARC for the meal they are about to share with us. By the time they are done with their introductions all of the participants in our Cherokee Park United, Annual Leader’s Retreat, are eager and ready to share in the meal they have set before us. It makes a difference when people believe what they are offering is a meal that is healthy, nourishing and will satisfy those who are hungry.**

 **The prophet Isaiah is convinced that he has a meal that will satisfy the hungry and thirsty as well. In our Hebrew lesson, the prophet takes an approach similar to the staff at the ARC Retreat Center by enthusiastically describing the meal that is being set before us.**

 **But before introducing the meal Isaiah adds a caveat that immediately puts him in tension with the way we commonly operate and makes us a little suspicious. Isaiah says, “This meal is free. There is no payment required”.**

There is a story I have shared before, but I will share it again because it underscores some of our reservations about Isaiah’s free lunch. When I was eight years old a carnival came to my home town of Braham. I took what little money I had and with permission from my parents rode my bike to town with a friend. After going on a couple rides, I saw a game of chance that I knew I had to play. It cost 25 cents, which by today’s standards would be about $2.00. The game had a shovel which you maneuvered into a pile of kernelled corn in hopes of retrieving some cool prizes. There was a watch I was especially excited about. I gave the man my quarter. I didn’t win the watch, but I thought I had done pretty well, until I got home and showed my parents their new plastic pickle fork.

 We always want to believe you can get something for nothing, but experience tells us, it’s not true. There is a cost. You have to pay. If you have any goals at all in life we learn early on that it requires hard work on our part. If you want to do well in school, you can’t just go come home and sit in front of the television for six hours. If you want to make the school basketball team, you can’t just lay around in your room and then one day show up and say O.K. coach I’m ready to go. Anyone who has learned a trade or skill of any sort will tell you that he or she had to work at it. It costs something of them.

 In the marketplace where we live and work you pay for what you get. There may be discounts on the merchandise at Target or Kmart. There may even be some great sales. But, nothing is free. In the marketplace economy through which our salaries are established, social security payments are determined, we must earn what we receive. We know the rules to this marketplace, and even when distorted by big banks for the most part they make sense to us.

 The people who Jesus encounters in our Gospel lesson understandably assume God operates on this same market place economy. They are convinced God uses marketplace accounting to keep track of who deserves a happy marriage, who deserves good health, who deserves a good job, who deserves a trouble free life and who deserves afflictions, troubles and worries. When Jesus is asked did the people who were killed by their Roman oppressors or the people who died because of poor construction get what they deserve, they are asking a question based on the market place principles that commonly govern our lives. But, Jesus surprising answer is a rejection of these calculations with a resounding no. There is no price on the abundance of God’s grace.

 **The message Isaiah offers and for which Jesus ultimately is executed is a tough sell precisely because it undermines the dominant way the world commonly operates. Isaiah is like those young people we see out on Robert St., jumping up and down with their signs, encouraging us to come and buy a Cesar’s pizza or get your oil changed at Jiffy Lube, except in Isaiah’s case, there is no charge. “**Ho, (ho, ho, 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.”

 No one is left out of God’s market place. Everyone is welcome. There is no scarcity. No blaming anyone for the circumstances of their life. Everyone who thirsts, everyone who hungers is welcome. “Listen carefully to me,” says Isaiah, “and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” Like the staff at the ARC Retreat Center, Isaiah believes in the meal that has been prepared by God.

 With the meal spread out before us the prophet says, “Let me introduce you to the love of God. Let me introduce you to God’s forgiveness. Let me introduce you to God’s healing. Let me introduce you to God’s compassion. Let me introduce you to the justice of God””. Each item is presented by describing the ingredients and the flavors that will be encountered.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells the story about an unproductive fig tree. The owner wants to cut it down, but the gardener convinces the owner to let him put some fertilizer on the tree and give it another year. One way to look at the parable Jesus tells us is for the church to simply ask, what are we doing with this banquet of abundance that God has prepared? Will we drop a little forgiveness on the table, kind of going through the motions, while holding onto our grievance? Will we offer up some compassion, but with little enthusiasm? Will we put out a small plate of justice, but with no expectation that anything will ever change.

 A productive fig tree is a tree, a community of faith that eagerly shares the abundance found in God’s economy and the meal God prepares for us.

When Isaiah speaks about God’s love, he gleefully reminds us the love and care we show to one another is a key ingredient. When Isaiah talks about God’s compassion, he enthusiastically points out that the food cart you fill up on Sundays for the local food shelf is one of the key ingredients. When Isaiah introduces forgiveness he eagerly tells us how we respond to those who have harmed us is one of the key ingredients. When Isaiah introduces justice, it is impossible to miss Isaiah’s deep conviction that justice is given its flavor by ingredients such as advocating for just wages, housing, and child care, giving voice to the work of antiracism, taking a stance in caring for the earth.

 Those of us at the ARC Retreat Center know firsthand **the enthusiasm of the staff at ARC for the meals they are about to share.** We are the ones who introduce this abundant banquet God sets before us. How will we introduce this banquet? **It makes a difference when we truly believe what is being offered is a meal that is healthy, nourishing and will satisfy all who are hungry.**

**Isaiah 55:1-9**

***In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah addresses a people who have spent a life time as Exiles in Babylon. Although some have managed to do O.K. within the Babylonian empire, many others are struggling to get by. Keenly aware they lack the power and the resources that could make a difference in their lives and world, they hunger and thirst for a new day. It is this context that the prophet invites them to a great banquet, reminding them there are no limits to the love & justice of God.***

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, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. eek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him 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.

**Luke 13:1-9**

***Like the people to whom the prophet Isaiah speaks, the people questioning Jesus*** *are deeply influenced by the cultural assumptions of scarcity and therefore when bad things happen it must be because the people themselves are to blame. Jesus rejects such assumptions, while at the same time affirming the important role each of us has to play in bringing into being the Realm of God.*

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"