

Isaiah 55:1-9  
February 28, 2016

“Call to Covenant”

Rev. William Utke  
Emanuel UCC, HC

This past summer I was out for a walk on one of our warmer days. A few blocks down Delaware Ave I came upon a child sitting outside behind a folding table, a pitcher of lemonade with plastic cups on the table, and a sign “Lemonade 50 cents.” As I approached the child asked like a good salesperson, “Hi Sir, you look thirsty,” (OH NO Now I’m a Sir I thought?) The child continued, “Would you like to buy a cup of lemonade for 50 cents?” I said, “I am so sorry, I would buy one but I don’t have any pockets so I didn’t bring any money.” He smiled and got more excited, “I can give you a cup if you want.” Before I answered he began to pour the drink and it became clear he had made this offer to others as I noticed his lemonade pitcher was low and his donation jar nearly empty.

So in Isaiah we have this Open invitation from the Lord “come eat and drink without money and without price.” By the end of the passage it is clear the Lord is talking about the bread of Love, the water of forgiveness and all the things that make life REALLY good.

A simple online list tells some of the most important things children need... I would argue we all need them. We all need; love, time and attention, encouragement and affirmation, stability, opportunity, discipline, a good laugh, room to make mistakes and know we are still loved, hugs and kisses. I’m sure we could add to this list: friends, self-esteem, understanding our gifts, compassion, boundaries, a strong backbone to stand up for our self -- all of us from 9 seconds to 199 years need these things.

Isaiah is offering an opportunity to re-prioritize the truly good things in life which we so easily take for granted and move to the sidelines. Mainline Protestant Christians love to sing the song of this Open Invitation. It fits in with our understanding of God’s call to offer Radical Hospitality, welcoming the stranger, to open our arms to everyone no matter who you are or where you are on the journey of life.

We like to make this sound like an easy “Y’all Come” invitation, but is it really that easy to respond to God’s call which can include welcoming Syrians seeking asylum, or challenging another who claims all Muslims are terrorists? The acapella singing group, “Sweet Honey and the Rock” remind us how difficult this welcome is in the lyrics to their song, “Would You Harbor Me.”

*“Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, a heretic, convict or spy? Would you harbor a runaway woman, or child, a poet, a prophet, a king? Would you harbor an exile, or a refugee, a person living with AIDS? Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garrett, a Truth a fugitive or a slave...?”*

We might wonder what was going on in Israel’s life that they yearned for this Open invitation. Isaiah’s story was written 540 years before Jesus, 45 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple when many Israelites found themselves deported to Babylon. The Babylonian

exile created questions among the Israelites wondering about their status as God's people and questioning God's supreme power and authority.

So in the midst of forced displacement, the author writes to assure Israel God still has compassion for them; and despite the exile, God is still Lord of heaven and history. The promise is the Lord will act soon to allow the exiles to return home, a journey Isaiah predicts will be more glorious than the journey of their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt.

But as we extend Isaiah's open invitation we need to be clear what we are inviting people into. At the heart of this story today is Covenant. The covenant with God and with each other to live the values of God each day; even when, especially when they come into conflict with conventional wisdom and ways of living. This is what Jesus did. Call it his subversive wisdom or prophetic ministry, Jesus taught a way of life which at times conflicted with the common, accepted, even assumed values of his day. Covenant is a call to live in the world without being of the world.

Our covenant with God and each other forms around a set of Core Values which is comprised of the same cost free values which appear so beautiful and wonderful when we first receive the Open invitation to come "eat and drink without money and without price."

In the story from Isaiah today we hear the Lord raising a megaphone in a crowded public marketplace and announcing over the bustle, "HEY, COME OVER HERE AND YOU WILL FIND IMPORTANT THINGS MOST OF US HAVE PUSHED TO THE SIDELINES... AND THEY ARE FREE."

In our day where love is too often conditional, we are part of a covenant which offers everyone an invitation to the living waters of God's Grace, and with work we find space for each one who is named and claimed by God's unconditional love.

In a land of revenge and retaliation, we are part of a covenant committed to the broken bread of God's forgiveness, where we work together so each person can receive a fresh start, mistakes can be mended, because God's ways are not our ways.

In a land of power and status consumption, we are part of a covenant community which sets a table where all God's people find a seat of empowerment and hope.

In a land of hatred, conflict and war, we are part of a covenant which issues an invitation to bring all to the waters of peace and unity.

In a land of fear, we are part of a covenant where God repeatedly tells us not to be governed by fear, and we dare to believe God's Word, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

Here in the church we dare to hold up this vision of the world, and to live into this vision as best we are able.

So when you leave here today let your life be your megaphone. Live the values of God always, and especially when they conflict with the values of society around us. Sometimes the core values of our divine covenant won't conflict at all and we will become pleasantly surprised at how God is at work in the world. Other times we will encounter delightful stories of people we considered outside the covenant who become powerful examples of how to live God's values. But there will be tough times when we will have to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love our sworn enemies, pray for those who persecute us, overcome our fear, and times we will need to work and pray for Justice which goes against the tide of popular opinion.

Our strength comes from the assurance that God is filled with compassion, and God is still Lord of heaven and history.

Amen