

“Return to the Lord”—Isaiah 55:1-9

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.

Seek 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.

I learned a portion of this morning’s Scripture, not from reading it in the Bible, but by singing it. Tammy and I were singing in the choir at Asbury United Methodist Church in Durham, North Carolina, and one of the pieces we rehearsed for weeks contained these words:

Let the wicked forsake his way  
and the unrighteous man his thoughts,  
and return unto the Lord,  
and he will have mercy  
and abundantly pardon.

But we had to sing the line “He will have MERcy” just like that—with the emphasis on the “MER” of “mercy.” Now, there were no markings in the score that said we had to sing it that way, but that’s the way the choir director wanted it, so that’s how we sang it: “He will have MERcy.”

It didn’t make a lot of sense to me then, that emphasis on “MERcy,” but now, nearly forty years later, it makes perfect sense. You see, in this Season of Lent, we’re so focused on what to give up for Lent—how we can deny the physical to sharpen the spiritual. We’re so focused on repentance—on turning away from sin and turning back to the Lord and to his ways. But we forget that the real focus should be on grace—on God’s unearned, undeserved love and favor toward us. The real focus should be on God’s forgiving love and abundant pardon for our sins. The real focus of this Season of Lent should be on God’s people turning back to him, so that he will have mercy on them.

So let’s be clear about the audience to whom the prophet spoke then and to whom he speaks today. You see, it’s very easy to see this as a word for the “sinners”—you know, “the wicked” and “the unrighteous”—and that’s not us, is it? It’s very easy for us to see this as a word for the drunkards and the addicts and the abusers and the promiscuous and everyone who does those things we wouldn’t do because we’re good people. But the truth is that this is a word addressed to the People of God—a call for God’s people to come back to God’s way and experience the love, mercy, and grace that God offers to his faithful people.

In ancient days, this call went out to God’s Covenant People who had broken covenant with their God. It went out to a people who had turned away from the God of Israel and turned to the gods of their neighbors, to Baal and Ashtarte and Molech, to their idols and their rituals. This call went out to a people who forgot the covenant summons to love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength and to love their neighbors as themselves. This call went out to a people who had forgotten that part of the covenant was to care for rather than oppress the poor, the widows, the orphans, the resident aliens, and the marginalized of society. The prophet’s words weren’t a call to “others”—those outside the covenant community. This was a call to those who were part of a people whom God had claimed as his own.

It was a simple call—return, the prophet said, to the Lord. Put aside your idolatries—turn your back on those foreign gods who weren’t gods at all and

worship only the God of Israel. Put aside anything that might trample on the needs of the helpless—seek instead to help them and lift them up. Put aside anything that is contrary to the covenant God made with his Chosen People—seek instead to live inasmuch as possible according to the Law God gave to Moses. Return to the Lord, the prophet said, and he will have mercy and abundantly pardon—he will restore you to the joy and peace that comes from being in a right relationship with him.

So how do these words speak to us today? How do these words speak to we who are the people of the New Covenant? It's so easy for us to presume upon the grace of God—it's so easy for us to say that, because Jesus has covered our sins, we have no need to repent, no need to turn back to God, no need to continually seek his mercy.

What we so conveniently forget, is that we are both saints *and* sinners. We are saints—our sins have been forgiven by our faith in what Jesus has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection. We've been given new life—a life to be lived in obedience to God through the Holy Spirit.

But we are still sinners. We've professed Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and we've said that, in response to God's love made real in Jesus, we will seek to live as God calls us—loving him with all that we are and all that we have, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and loving one another in the community of faith as Jesus has loved us, that is, with self-sacrificing, self-giving love.

But who here today can truly say that he or she does any of this fully and completely and perfectly? None of us, I believe. Each of us still harbors thoughts and speech and ways that offend God and hurt others, even our sisters and brothers in the community of faith. We still have things in our lives that we put before God. We still have prejudices and opinions and actions that put others down rather than lift them up. And we don't always love our sisters and brothers in the church as Jesus loves us.

But it's not hopeless—we're not hopeless. The prophet calls us, as the people of the New Covenant, to turn away, in the power of the Holy Spirit, from the thoughts and the actions and the speech that offend God and hurt others. The prophet calls us to put away our idolatries—to turn away, in the power of the Holy Spirit, from anything and everything we put ahead of God and God's will and God's way. The prophet calls us to turn away, in the power of the Holy Spirit, from the prejudices and attitudes and actions that tear people down. The prophet calls us, the People of the New Covenant, to return to the Lord.

You see, Isaiah's good news to the covenant people of old is still good news to the covenant people of today—for the God whose ways are higher than ours, whose thoughts are deeper than ours, and whose forgiving love is deeper and wider and higher than any love we've ever known, calls us to come back to him. He calls us to turn away from our idols, from those things that we look to for fulfillment

and satisfaction; and he calls us to turn back to him, to place him and his will in their rightful position in ruling and controlling our lives. He calls us to come to him and find in him the fulfillment and satisfaction that he alone can provide, the fulfillment and satisfaction that fills our spiritual hunger and quenches the thirst of our souls. This God of grace calls us to come back to him, to know that our sins are forgiven and that our lives have meaning and purpose beyond ourselves. This God of grace invites us to come to him and eat and drink for free—because the price has already been paid. The God of grace has already paid the price himself in his Son Jesus, who lived to show us the way of God’s kingdom, who died to heal the breach between God and us caused by our sin, and who lives again as the promise that we who have returned to the Lord will live with him in this life and in the life to come.

You know, this Season of Lent, with its emphasis on self-examination, repentance, and confession, can truly seem oh so burdensome. It sometimes feels like its bereft of good news—we’re reminded that we’re sinners, but we’re often left wondering what to do with our sin and our guilt. But the beauty of Lent is that it invites us, as do all the seasons of the Christian year, to experience the forgiving, renewing, life-giving, life-changing grace of God—God’s unearned, undeserved love and favor toward us. Yes, the call to repentance and confession is there—we must honestly know and claim and name our idols, our faults, and our failings before the Lord (who knows them already, but who gives us the opportunity to name them for our own sakes). Yet the call to experience forgiveness and fulfillment and joy and peace is there as well—to know mercy and abundant pardon, to be restored and renewed in a right relationship with the One who calls himself “I AM.” To know the food that fills our spiritual hunger and the drink that quenches our spiritual thirst won’t cost us a buck and a half for a half-liter bottle—to know that food and drink requires only that we return to the Lord—for he will indeed have mercy and abundantly pardon. Thanks be to God!