

Obstacle Course
Isaiah 55: 1-9; Psalm 63: 1-8 (UMH 788); 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13
March 3, 2013 (Third Sunday in Lent)
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I Introduction

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. That's a wonderful way to introduce this passage from Isaiah that is our lectionary reading for today, because most of us operate on the grounds of a very old proverb that we all believe, I think, in our heart of hearts, which is you get what you pay for. Right? That anything worthwhile has got to cost something. It fits, also, into the usual attitude that we bring to Lent, which is if we just work a little bit harder, if we just deny ourselves a little bit more, we will honor God and receive the blessings that God wants to share with us. There's a piece of that that's true that we'll get to later. But today Isaiah shares with us a far more fundamental truth, which is a joyous offer of free and plenteous grace.

You heard those words that Dana read, "Everyone who thirsts come to the waters. And you that have no money come and buy and eat, come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread? And you labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food." That passage is about the lavish grace that God wants to pour out on us. It's also about our tendency in the face of that grace, to pour ourselves into things that will not ultimately satisfy us.

We're journeying through Lent this year reflecting on how we cultivate happiness in our lives, which is an unusual topic for Lent, which has the normal feel of a very heavy season to it. But I want to suggest that our scripture lessons this morning are

actually about rethinking what Lent is about and thinking of the sacrifice that we tend to associate with Lent, not as a heavy obligation that we have to earn God's favor, but rather as an opportunity to strip away some of the obstacles that we put in the way of accepting God's gracious offer of relationship.

II. Ruled by Fear

So, the interesting question that our passage from Isaiah raises for us is that if John Wesley is right that we are created to be happy in God, and Isaiah is right that God has given us all the things that we need to be happy, why are we so resistant to that? Why do we choose to be unhappy in the face of the grace that God is always offering us?

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister writes that happiness is a social imperative. We talked about that last week. But then she says unhappiness is a social disease. She goes on to unpack that a little bit and argue that we have set up these structures around us in order to keep us unhappy and unsatisfied. We have whole industries in our country that are geared towards keeping us from being satisfied with the way our life is right now, and persuading us that if only we had the next thing, that would give us the happiness that we are craving. So we have created the societal structures in ways that are geared towards keeping us unhappy and dissatisfied because that's how we perpetuate our addiction to consumerism. But I want to suggest that it may be a little deeper than that because we're all pretty bright folks. Right? Amen.

We understand the nature of advertising and the desire to keep us dissatisfied. I want to suggest that we fall into that because we want to. We crave falling in the

patterns of unhappiness and dissatisfaction on some level because it's more comfortable for us. We fall enthusiastically for their ploy over and over again. Paul reminds us in this passage from Corinthians that grace and freedom are a little bit more threatening to us than we sometimes like to admit. He harkens back to the Exodus story. He's writing to a church in Corinth that is largely gentile, but he talks about this even to them because he wants them and us to understand that as we have become members of this community of faith, that Exodus story is about us too. He reminds the church that in Egypt we were in slavery. We were oppressed. We were punished. We were at someone else's beck and call.

Once God has freed us from that slavery through God's mighty hand and outstretched arm, how quickly the freedom and grace that God offers us felt very uncomfortable. Right? The people, as soon as they get through the Red Sea and out into the desert, start to grumble how good it was back there in Egypt. We had three square meals a day. We knew where our food was coming from. It was stable. It was secure. Those were the good old days. How much we struggle to accept the free gift of grace that God offers us. God pours out God's self in manna, and quail, and water flowing in the desert. It's just so hard for us to trust that. It's, frankly, just much easier to work hard for your food and for the gifts that we want because then that's all under our control. Right? I don't need to trust, and trust is so hard for us.

We live in a culture that works hard and plays hard, living life to the fullest as far as we can tell. But I wonder sometimes if it's not because we're hard workers or because we like to have fun. Sometimes it feels to me as though our frenetic pace is our way of avoiding the fearfulness, the anxiety that we start to feel when we experience

freedom in God. It's too tempting to go back to Egypt, to live the way that we used to live before we were made free, before we had the gracious offer of relationship in Christ. We fear the stillness. We fear what we may find there inside of ourselves. We fear what we may hear from God. Maybe we fear that if we are really still enough, we would not hear God at all, so we fill our lives with busyness, and activity, and work and play, and earning so that we don't have to worry about trusting at all.

III. Testing the Waters

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Most men live lives of quiet desperation and they go to their graves with the song still in them." Is there a song in you that is longing to get sung and that you just can't trust enough to let out or maybe not trust enough to be quiet so that you can hear it? It's so easy to blame our unhappiness on the people around us, the situations around us. If only my boss understood me better, I would be happy. If only my family was more responsive to my needs, I would be happy. If only I wasn't going through this personal crisis, I could be happy. It's all the stuff out there that is being imposed on me that keeps me from being all of who I am. Paul reminds us delicately that maybe some of that we choose ourselves because Egypt is known. It's safer and I don't have to risk the freedom and the life of joy and hope that God promises me. But what if that promise isn't true? It's just easier to rely on myself.

Where are the places in your life that you are being invited now to experience freedom, to experience joy and new life? What are the things that you need to get rid of to open up some room for that to happen? Or if you're in the midst of a particular crisis, what is this period in your life calling you to learn about yourself that will carry you into

the next stage of your life with joy and power? Lent is a time when we focus on spiritual disciplines, but I think sometimes we get confused about where those disciplines should happen. John Wesley was very clear in talking to us about the fact that God's grace to us is always encountering us before we even know it's there or before we know we need it. John Wesley called this *prevenient grace*, the grace that beckons us forward. Then Wesley talked about *justifying grace*, the grace that God extends to us to set us right with God, the grace offered to us on the cross of Christ and through the power of the resurrection to make life with God possible. God does all of that without our participation other than accepting it.

Then John Wesley talks about *sanctifying grace*, which is the journey that we take to deepen our walk with God. That's a place where the spiritual disciplines come in, but they're not there as ways for us to earn God's grace. They are ways that we respond to the grace that we have experienced joyfully and seek to mold our lives into the image of Christ so that we can take the joy and the happiness that God offers us and deepen that and broaden that. That's where the discipline piece comes in, but it's a discipline that is a response to a free gift that God has offered us.

IV. Conclusion

Lent is a time when we re-center ourselves when we refocus a little bit trying to live out of the gracious offer of life that God has given us, so I want to invite you, as we continue this Lenten journey together, to maybe trust a little more, maybe quiet yourself a little bit more, center yourself a little bit more, listen a little bit more carefully for the song that is in you trying desperately to get out.

There's an old Cherokee story about a grandfather talking to his grandson about the battle that goes on inside all of us all the time and he says, "My son, the battle is between two wolves. One is evil. It is anger, and envy, and jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies and pride. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth and compassion. These wolves are always battling one another." The grandson thinks for a moment and says, "Well, which one wins?" The grandfather says, "Whichever one you feed."

Amen.