

## ***Setting an Open Table***

Isaiah 55:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9 and 18-23

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### **I. Introduction**

Fleeing persecution in their own country and, truth be told, looking for some greater economic opportunity here, a group of immigrants crossed the border into our country. Fearful and unable to speak the language, unsure of their surroundings, they came not entirely sure how they were even going to live. But instead of the hostility they had been expecting, they were embraced by a group of Americans who, unconcerned with their status or documentation, helped them find work and homes and settle into a new land. The year was 1621 and the immigrant pilgrims were so deeply grateful for all that God had given them and for the reception that they had received from the native tribes here that kept them alive, they invited the whole community to a feast which we now continue to celebrate as Thanksgiving.

In the wonderful celebration of Thanksgiving, we not only remember our own history and heritage as people who have come to this country in waves over history, we also celebrate one of the most fundamental calls to us as people of faith which is the invitation to embrace God's graciousness with deep and abiding gratitude and thankfulness.

### **II. Gratitude**

In this beautiful passage from Isaiah that Dana read for us, we hear these words, "Come and buy wine and milk without money and without price, for why do you spend your money on that which does not satisfy?" We spend a lot of our resources on that which does not satisfy and we often ignore the incredible graciousness of a God who gives us everything that we have and everything that we need as a pure gift. And I think we resist that sometimes because it's so much more comfortable for us to believe that the things that we have and the lives that we lead are the result of our hard work, our good stewardship, our giftedness. Because to acknowledge the gifts from God is to realize that we are not in control of those gifts all the time and that's frightening for us. So, it's much easier for us to develop the mindset that we have pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps and have made our lives work.

Coach Barry Switzer said, "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple." And I think that's true for a lot of us. We, particularly in this country and in this time, have found ourselves born on third base in an amazing country with huge resources and opportunity for us to express our creativity and our work in ways that were inconceivable in other generations and continue to be inconceivable in other parts of the world. All is an act of grace from a God who wants us, who yearns for us to lead rich and fulfilling lives. And gratitude is the only response to those gifts. Which is why when we read the Scriptures over and over and over again, we hear the

Scripture writers calling us to thanksgiving, give thanks to God for God is good. His mercy endures from age to age. Give thanks, give thanks, give thanks. Over and over the Scriptures remind us, because it's not our normal mindset. We struggle with this. It's so much easier to complain about the things that we're wrestling with.

I was talking to somebody this week in a fairly long conversation, and through the whole conversation they did nothing but complain, and amongst the complaints was being surrounded by people who didn't do anything but complain. And it was really funny to listen to because in a grand scheme of things, we have so little to complain about. We're so blessed as people. But what it's a reminder of is that -- and I think the reason the Scriptures keep harping on this so relentlessly is -- gratitude is a discipline that we are invited to engage in. We are not necessarily naturally thankful people and the Scripture needs to remind us over and over again that thankfulness is the only response to a God who has given us everything. Thankfulness is a discipline. Thankfulness is learned. It doesn't just spring up. We need to practice it.

### **III. Gratitude is a Discipline**

And many of you will remember that we are blessed with many people who do practice that, but one that was really gifted at it was a lifelong member of our congregation by the name of Annette Fletchall. You all remember Annette. Annette was relentlessly grateful. But it wasn't because she had more to be grateful for than anybody else. She engaged in thankfulness as a discipline. And actually I came to understand this as I was preparing her funeral sermon a couple of months ago. I came to realize that very early in her life, she had made a decision that she was going to close every single day running through her mind the things that she had to be thankful for that day. She actually kept a journal, a daily diary of all the things that happened that day for which she was thankful. And those of you that were blessed to know Annette know that that attitude of thankfulness radiated from her.

Annette was a luminous person and people got drawn to that like moths to a flame, we wanted to be around that kind of thankfulness. But again it wasn't because she had more to be thankful for. She decided that she was going to engage in a discipline of thankfulness. And friends, this is a good week to make that decision. I know New Year's is when we make all of our resolutions, but I want to throw out to you that this week is a good week to start practicing what it looks like to be thankful. I know many of you are part of families that as you gather around the table start off the Thanksgiving feast by going around the table and offering up something that you are thankful for. That's a good tradition. But it shouldn't just be around the table. All of us are so richly blessed and our invitation on a week like this week is to remember those places where God has blessed us and all the ways that God has given us what we need to be who we are, and to answer the call that God has given us.

### **IV. Sowing seeds**

Our New Testament lesson is a very familiar story about sowing seeds, and usually when we reflect on this passage and place ourselves in the story, we're invited to place ourselves in the story in a couple of places. Sometimes it's the sower where we're sowing seeds. More often, and this is made explicit in Jesus' explanation, more often we are invited to reflect on what kind of ground are we for the seed to fall into? Are we prepared to hear the transforming Word of God so that it can take off and take root and bear fruit in our lives?

Our first hymn this morning actually invited us to take a different role though in that story and talks about asking that we would be wholesome grain. What does it mean to be a wholesome seed that wherever we are planted -- rocky ground, thin soil, rich soil -- we are offering wholesome seed that can take root and hopefully by God's grace flourish? I want to suggest that gratitude is what makes that seed wholesome. That if we were to seed wherever we found ourselves with a spirit of gratitude, things would change, people would start to see the movement of God's spirit in their lives and start to respond with joy and power, which is what God wants from us.

## **V. Conclusion.**

So, I want to invite you this week, invite all of us, to engage in a different sort of discipline, to put aside all of the things that we have to complain about and focus just a little bit more on all of the places where God has so richly graced and blessed us. Watch what that does for your spirit, watch how that starts to create a light that glows from within and that people around us notice. Our God is a rich and gracious God who has given us everything that we need and now scattered us to see where those gifts might bear fruit.

Amen.