

# Hey! We are Invited!

A sermon by Wendell Griffen, Pastor, New Millennium Church, Little Rock, Ar.

Isaiah 55:1-13

5Ho, 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. 2Why 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. 3Incline 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. 4See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5See, 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.

6Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 7let 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. 8For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. 9For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 10For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. 12For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

The central message of the passage from Isaiah 55 that we focus on today is that God openly invites all humanity into holy fellowship and participation in what God is doing in the world. The prophet expresses that invitation repeatedly.

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters ...* is a “Now hear this!” kind of

statement to all humanity yearning to be restored to fellowship with God. God is appealing to us, imploring us, pleading with us. God calls us to come and receive from God what cannot be bought, sold, or stolen—restoration. We've been invited by God to a banquet although we have no way to pay the admission price. We've been invited to healing even though we have no health insurance or money to pay the healer. We've been invited. We've been invited. We've been invited.

So why are so many people uncomfortable with God?

Pride is one reason. God's invitation to "everyone who thirsts ..." and "you that have no money" expresses the divine notion that none of us can afford to live without God's forgiveness, yet none of us can do anything to acquire God's forgiveness. That is a very challenging message to people who believe they are self-made, self-sufficient, and self-determined.

Somehow we develop the idea that we can go it alone in life. By the time we realize the folly of that notion, we've consumed too much of the self-righteousness potion. So, as the prophet declared in this passage, we "spend ... money for that which is not bread, and ... labor for that which does not satisfy."

We've been offered free invitations to God's banquet of forgiveness. Instead, many people are trying to buy or earn righteousness on our own terms. Until we give up the idea that God's forgiveness can be earned or purchased on our own, we'll continue to "spend ... money for that which is not bread, and ... labor for that which does not satisfy."

But there is another hindrance. God's gracious message of forgiveness and invitation to righteous fellowship is often presented in uninviting ways by people whose actions are not welcoming. God's universal invitation to "everyone who thirsts" has, in every age, been hijacked by people who somehow view themselves as being divinely preferred and commissioned to discriminate against or otherwise mistreat others.

- In our time, people who are homosexual are not welcomed.
- In our time, people who are undocumented immigrants are persecuted.
- In our time, Palestinians are victims of Jim Crow-like segregation and apartheid-like discrimination in the Holy Land that is their ancestral home.
- In our time, women and people who are poor, sick, elderly, or otherwise

vulnerable are not welcomed.

In many instances, religious people and distorted teachings about religion discourage these and other vulnerable people from believing God's invitation to life and holy fellowship.

But the divine invitation remains. God steadfastly calls us to "come to the waters." Despite our self-righteous pride and the many ways religious people contaminate God's wonderful offer of grace, God relentlessly implores us to "call on him while he is near." God constantly invites us to forsake our wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts and come back to God.

Did I say "come back to God?" Yes! We are like the prodigal son in the parable Jesus taught in Luke's Gospel (Luke 15:11-32). We are invited to come back to God because we belong with God! We are never where we should be, what we should be, and who we should be apart from God. No matter what we acquire, do, or desire, we are always homeless until we are restored to fellowship with God.

The good news is that God wants us back. God wants us back even when we want to be away. God wants us back even when religious snobs behave like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. The elder brother in that parable isn't like God. He is like the people in congregations who look with disapproval as God welcomes humble souls back home. He is like privileged people who want to continue discriminating against the former victims of discrimination. Unlike them, God doesn't make it onerous for us to be restored to fellowship. God welcomes back with a joy that is extravagantly generous.

The supreme message of God's extravagant generosity has been revealed to us in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus welcomed the very people who were shunned by the religious authorities of his time and place. Jesus befriended them, socialized with them, stood up for them when they were threatened, and hung with them at his own death. Jesus included them among his inner circle, and trusted them to continue the ministry of God's extravagant generosity after his resurrection.

If we will be followers of Jesus, we must be his followers in the ministry of reconciliation and restoration in the spirit of God's extravagant generosity. We must follow Jesus in proclaiming God's invitation to all that welcomes everyone

and all persons in God's love. We must follow Jesus in standing up for and protecting people from abuse and oppression. We must resist the temptation to take on the mindset and methods of the elder son who shunned the banquet his father hosted to welcome the returned prodigal son.

That means we must join God in welcoming those who have been excluded, and protecting those who have been are being threatened and mistreated.

- Let us welcome back those who have broken the law and help them return to full and wholesome fellowship in their families, neighborhoods, and return to honest work that provides them a living income.
- Let us join God in welcoming home people whose lives have been tormented by addiction, abuse, and other woes.
- Let us join God in protecting immigrants, racial, and religious minorities from discrimination.
- Let us join God in calling self-righteous and self-centered people to come back home to God.

If we are people of God and followers of Jesus, we must not just talk about God's grace during worship sessions. We must live the open table grace of God in every aspect of our being. God's invitation must be our method of life, not merely the highlight of worship services. Let us live the open table grace of God!

Amen.