

I Can't Get No Satisfaction
Sermon on Isaiah 55:1-9 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, March 11, 2007

What a difference forty years make. When the Rolling Stones performed their number one hit song, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1965, the network's censors forced them to change one of the lyrics because it was too suggestive. Forty years later, the Rolling Stones performed the song for the 2006 Super Bowl halftime show, this time without changing a thing. Mick Jagger, who wrote all the lyrics except the title line, has said the song is about alienation from commercialized culture, an inability to find anything authentic, anything that satisfies the deepest longings of the human soul.

Had the Stones played Jerusalem some 2500 years ago, I think they would have found a very receptive audience. That period was a time of change for the people of Israel: Babylon, the country that had brutally crushed Jerusalem and sent its leading citizens into exile, had collapsed, and the Persian Empire under Cyrus was rising. Israel's time in exile was ended, and with the permission of Cyrus, the people of Jerusalem were now returning home. But to what kind of home were they returning? It is the same question facing those who fled New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: What will home be like? Is it safe? Where will one find all the things necessary for life in a once-familiar place, now changed by the ravages of time and nature? Will the grocery store and the hardware store be there? What about schools and shops, parks and playgrounds?

Slowly, like to New Orleans, the citizens of Jerusalem came back and began the work of rebuilding homes and neighborhoods and lives. They even began rebuilding the temple, the dwelling place of God on earth. But the task of rebuilding is slow, painful, time-consuming work. Fatigue, hopelessness, and resignation set in easily. Will life ever be the same again?

Into this situation of homecoming and hopelessness, rebuilding and resignation, the prophet speaks a word of hope and encouragement. Life will not be the same again; it will be better, for the prophet sees a new life with God breaking in upon the horizon. Of course, a new start can be uncertain, and that uncertainty may be reflected in the word our Bible translates as “Ho!” In Hebrew the word means ‘woe’ or ‘alas,’ and that is how it has been used every other time it appears throughout the book of Isaiah. Here, however, the word is a call for attention, getting us to shift our focus away from what we thought might happen to what actually is happening. “Everyone who thirsts,” the prophet says, “come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (55:1).

It sounds like an incredible deal—free water, free wine, free milk, even a free meal. Of course, as we are often warned, if a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is. There is no such thing as a free lunch, right? Surely there is a catch in here somewhere. While it must be admitted that “The summons to buy something that is freely given, without charge, is paradoxical”¹, the unmistakable point is that God freely bestows his grace on us, freely feeds us with the good gifts of the earth and heaven.

God does this because it is God’s nature to be generous with his gifts. This can be a hard thing to believe in a world such as ours, dominated as it is by the economics of capitalism and free markets, whose first law is the law of scarcity. Capitalism is built in part on the idea that “productive resources are limited” whereas “the desires of human beings are virtually unlimited.”² Because people’s desire for a thing generally exceeds the amount of that thing that is available, we have to make choices and select among restricted alternatives. And as my

¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible vol. 19A (New York: Doubleday, 2002) 369.

² James D. Gwartney and Richard L. Stroup, *Microeconomics: Private and Public Choice*, fifth ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1990) 4.

economics textbook notes right from the start, “Scarce goods have a cost—there are no free lunches.”³

Fortunately for us, God doesn’t read economics textbooks. God doesn’t know the meaning of the word “scarcity,” isn’t aware that his gifts should be “limited.” God’s love for his creation, and particularly for human beings is unlimited. Even when Paul prays that the Ephesians “may have the power to comprehend, . . . what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (3:18-19), he is really saying that God’s love is so immense as to be immeasurable.

But we have a problem with things we cannot measure. We like to count and quantify, to tally and total up. We are besotted with the idea that the one who has the most money, power, homes, cars, etc. wins, and yet no one these days feels like a winner. As one writer puts it, “Despite an astonishing appetite for life, more and more Americans are feeling overworked and dissatisfied. In the world’s most affluent nation, epidemic rates of stress, anxiety, depression, obesity and time urgency are now grudgingly accepted as part of everyday existence....”⁴ Ours is a nation of rampant consumerism, and in our national life we have come to a point where more is never enough.

To cite but one example, let us consider the amount of food we eat. “A study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that since the 1970s, the size of cookies has increased by 700 percent, muffins by 333 percent, steaks by 224 percent, and bagels by nearly 200 percent. Servings of sodas, burgers, and fries are two to five times larger.”⁵ Our food is bigger than ever, and we eat more and more of it, but are we satisfied?

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ From the website for Peter C. Whybrow’s *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough*, <http://www.peterwhybrow.com/>.

⁵ Mary J. Loftus, “Cheeseburger in Paradise?” in *Emory Magazine*, Winter 2007 vol. 82, no.4.

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” the prophet asks (Isa. 55:2a). We work more and longer hours to earn more money which we spend on higher definition TVs, more luxurious cars, ever-larger homes, and fanciful, exotic vacations. But are we satisfied? “Listen carefully to me and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food,” says Isaiah (55:2b). The prophet promises something more than junk food, something rich and deeply satisfying. Where do we find such sumptuous, yet nourishing fare? We find it in the Word of God, for as Jesus reminds us, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt. 4:4).⁶ And the Word that God speaks, the Word that became flesh and lived among us (Jn. 1:14), has become for us living bread (Jn. 6:51), “[whose] flesh is true food and [whose] blood is true drink” (Jn. 6:55).

The word of God that is the Scripture and the Word of God that is Christ the Lord satisfy us in ways we could never have imagined had God not spoken to us. They are for us true food that feed the spirit and nourish the soul. The bread and wine now laid before us on the table, good gifts of the earth that point to Jesus, the gift of heaven promise, delight and satisfy us. Come to the waters, you who are thirsty for wholeness. Come to the table, you who hunger for righteousness. Come to the banquet, freely offered, all of you who hunger for the gifts of God. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8). Come to get God’s satisfaction.

⁶ Here Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3.