

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Isaiah 55:1-5

July 31, 2005  
The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

- <sup>1</sup> "Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without cost.
- <sup>2</sup> Why spend money on what is not bread,  
and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
- <sup>3</sup> Give ear and come to me;  
hear me, that your soul may live.  
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,  
my faithful love promised to David.
- <sup>4</sup> See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander of the peoples.
- <sup>5</sup> Surely you will summon nations you know not,  
and nations that do not know you will hasten to you,  
because of the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has endowed you with splendor."

What's the big deal with grass? Sure, I can appreciate a lush, green landscape just as much as the next gal—but I don't understand why having green grass is so important to us. We spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on fancy sprinklers to water our grass and make it grow. And then, so that we can get rid of most of the grass that we've just worked so hard to grow, we buy expensive lawn mowers to cut the grass. Then we gather up the grass cuttings—because we wouldn't want grass laying around on grass—in bags and wheel barrows and try to find someplace them. And if it's not a wet enough summer, we use ground water to water grass that isn't meant to grow when there isn't enough rain. But when someone beats the odds and is able to nurture a really nice, lush, green lawn—the kind you want to go barefoot in so you can wiggle your toes and let the fine blades of grass caress your feet—most of those lawns have signs that read, "Please keep off the grass". It's as if you're gazing upon something painted by Pablo Picasso or Diego Rivera rather than something watered and mowed by some average Joe or Josephine like yourself. I don't know when it happened, but at some point—a nice lawn became part of the American dream. Thousands of hours are spent every summer by those of us chasing the dream as we pull weeds, push mowers, and rake lawn cuttings.

This strange relationship we have with our lawns is normal to us—but I wonder what God would have to say about all this fuss we make each summer over something that's just going to die in a few months anyway. In fact, I often wonder what God would have to say about a lot of the things into which I pour my time, energy, and money. As opposed to obsessing about keeping a nice lawn, I focus on the interior of our house—rearranging pictures and knick-knacks until I

have them just so and if I don't have the perfect thing for just the right spot—I go out and buy something. Some people, Corey is among them, focus on cars. There's this catalog called Griot's and in it you can find just about any kind of car care product imaginable. And while I would just buy the cheapest car wash at Meijer and grab an old rag to give the Volkswagon a bath, Corey special orders fancy detergent and clothes from Griot's and washes that car with the same gentleness he gives Nathan a bath. And if it's not the lawn, or interior decorating, or cars then maybe it's boats, golf, quilting, scrap booking, bridge, shopping—the list goes on and on. And I'm not suggesting that these activities, objects, and hobbies are bad, I just often wonder, what does God think about them and the commitment we show towards them.

In Isaiah, God asks us “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” And, as is often the case, God's not really talking about bread when God talks about bread. To understand God's question, let's briefly review the historical context in which this part of Isaiah was written. In 586 BC, that's 586 years before Jesus was born, Judah, the home of the Jews, was conquered by the Babylonians. To diffuse the power of the Jewish people, the Babylonians took the most powerful and influential leaders of the Israelite nation and exiled them to distant parts of the Babylonian Empire, in other words they forced them to move away from Jerusalem and other centers of Jewish culture and power. The Babylonians weren't interested in killing or eliminating the Jews, rather they just wanted to make sure the Jews didn't have too much power, and the best way to assure that wouldn't happen was to separate the leaders of the Jewish community so that they couldn't organize against the Babylonians. When, approximately forty years later, the Babylonian army was conquered by the Persians, the Persian leader Cyrus was very tolerant of the Jews and allowed them to relocate from where they had been living in exile back to Jerusalem and the other parts of Judah in which they used to live. However, many of the Jews had built rather cushy lives for themselves in the places to which they had been exiled and they wanted to stay put—their wealth, lifestyle, and comfort were more important to them than was the reunification of the Jews into a central location. This, of course, diminished the political power, cultural revival, and strengthening of the Jewish religion. The writer of Isaiah recognized that the exilic Jews' reluctance to return to their homeland did not bode well for the future of the faith. It would be like all of your suddenly deciding that you were going to worship at home on Sunday mornings instead of making the effort to come into church. That wouldn't bode well for the future of our church just as the Jews' resistance didn't bode well for the future of the Jewish faith. And so the prophet, on behalf of God, explains that the outside trappings of success as determined by Babylonian standards are nothing compared to what God has to offer a reunited Nation of Jews. Again, watching Crystal Cathedral at home on Sunday morning is okay if you're sick or the weather is really bad, but it's nothing like being here with each other, singing, praying, hugging, and visiting together. It's not the same, just like the Jews refusing to return to their homes makes their faith not the same. And so God asks the Jews, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” All of the earthly wealth and comforts they have (that which is not bread and does not satisfy) will be nothing and the spiritual wealth they can glean from their faith (eating what is good and delighting in rich food) will be lasting and steadfast.

It begs the question of us—on what are we spending our money that is not bread—that which is not ultimately nourishing—and for what do we labor that does not really satisfy us? The first question can be answered by looking at all of our stuff and activities. How much of it really

brings meaning and nourishment to our lives? Perhaps pictures and special momentos bring us spiritual nourishment. Maybe particular books, movies, or musical recordings add meaning to our lives. Or, I think of my mom who played the piano for us during worship last week—I wonder what her life would be like without a piano—because it is through that instrument that she expresses her faith, her passion, and her love. Without that physical object, she would be bereft and spiritually malnourished. However, I’ve had a piano sitting around in our house since we moved in. It was in the guest room and I rarely played. For me, the piano was just another thing filling up my space and the clutter stressed me out—just the opposite of nourishing my soul. Instead of being bread that nourished my spirit, it was potato chips to my soul—junk food that I just didn’t need around.

And that’s what the Jews in exile were doing. They filled their lives with junk food for the soul. They invested so much time, energy, and their resources in being “Good Babylonians” when, truth be told, they will never be truly Babylonians, they will always be Jews, and as Jews, God is offering them wonderful things—free water, free food, free wine, free milk—freedom, mercy, compassion, salvation, if only they would follow God instead of following the Babylonians. God accepts the Jews for who they are, the Babylonians accept them only in so far as they serve their purposes, working for them, voting for them, giving them their money.

It reminds me of a scene from the mini-series *North and South*, based on the book of the same name by John Jakes. After Lincoln delivers the Emancipation Proclamation, Orrie Maine, on leave from military service in the confederate army, returns to Mount Royale, his family’s southern plantation, and finds his family’s slaves slowly filing down the road, moving away from the plantation, in their ragged clothes, carrying their few possessions in knapsacks or old carts. The Maine’s were a wealthy family and so the procession of newly-freed slaves was long. At the end of the line, nearest the gates to the Maine’s plantation are two elderly house slaves, they had been nearest and dearest to the Maine’s, treated almost like family. Orrie is shocked to see them leaving, he asks them how they can go—how can they leave the Maine’s—how can they leave Mount Royale, the only home they’ve ever known. One of the freed slaves replies, “Mr. Orrie Sir, we’s just lived here, this is your home. Now we’s gonna go get our own home.”

I picture God wanting the Jews who resided in places that weren’t really “home” but rather just places where they were living, to come back to their home—come back to Judah, but more important even, come back to God because God is the only true home they—or we—will ever have. And that’s a bit of truth to be had from this prophecy, no matter how much we might resist it, deny it, or try to avoid it—death is the ultimate end of our earthly, material endeavors. Lawns—no matter how green in July—are brown and dead in January. Houses, no matter how well-decorated or cared-for, get torn down, abandoned, or destroyed by the elements. Cars, no matter what is used to wash them, eventually rust, break down, and live out the rest of their days being stripped of parts and dignity in a salvage yard. God says the same of the investments the Israelites are making in the Babylonian power structure. All of these are just passing fancies, temporary distractions. God asks them and us to invest in what is lasting, true, and worth our money more than we invest in earthly diversions and pleasures. I don’t think it means that we’re not to enjoy some earthly diversions and pleasures, but when we do them at the cost of our relationship with God, each other, or even ourselves, then we have gone too far.

I must confess that I watch too much reality television. I guess it could be said that watching any reality television is watching too much reality television. But there are some programs I enjoy. One of them is Nanny 911. Families who are having a tough time getting it together with their kids request that a nanny come and help them turn their lives around. In last week's episode, a family of five was completely out of control. They had a six year old who kept beating up his brother. A three year old who refused to use the bathroom and would only relieve himself outdoors (thankfully for him they lived in Southern California), and a baby who, immediately upon being put down, screamed to be held again. The father of these children spent nearly 30 hours a week on his hobby—raising and training homing pigeons. While the children ran circles around their distressed mother inside the house, the father spent hours outside—grooming his pigeons and cleaning their cages. He had certainly gone too far. Instead of enriching his life and making him a better father and husband, he used his hobby as an escape from the more important parts of his life—his children and wife, because it was easier to be with the pigeons than it was to be with his own family. And it was probably easier for the Jews in exile to remain where they were than it was for them to pick up their lives and move back to Jerusalem—but we've said it before—that what God wants and asks of us is rarely the easiest or most comfortable option.

And though God is not calling us back to a particular geographical place like he was the Jews in Isaiah, God is calling us back to a spiritual home, calling for us to make distinctions between that which is eternal and everlasting, that which is the bread and butter that nourishes our souls--and that which is merely a passing fad—the junk food of our lives—something that may temporarily satisfy, but in the end leaves us hungering for something more. A lawn can't comfort you when a friend betrays you. A house can't shelter you from the storm of grief that follows the death of someone you dearly love. A clean car can't quench the thirst for meaning in your life. The “bling” of a shiny, new necklace or ring can't light your path when you've lost your way. Homing pigeons can't provide the love, care, and discipline that children need. Only God, and the people of God, can do those things. Only God, and the people of God are the bread and butter that sustain us for the living of these days and give us the hope and inspiration that come from knowing that this life is not as good as it gets—that things aren't really so great in exile. Our true glory will be when we come round right—when the endless turning and toiling of this life are over and we're welcomed home—to our heavenly home. And the more we try to make our lives now mirror that heavenly reality of love, justice, and simplicity—the more we can make this world like heaven on earth—a place where people are valued more than things, a place where who you are is more important than what you have, a place where everybody has what they need instead of just a few people having too much of what they want. That's when we'll have come 'round right. That's when we'll return from exile. That's when where we're living will truly become home.