

Isaiah 55:1-5 “Why Yes, I Do Take Requests”

To repeat one of the verses Tom just read –

Hey (Because it serves the same purpose as “Ho” without sounding funny), 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.

You know, when I read this passage, it sort of rubs me the wrong way. Not that I’m disagreeing with scripture or anything. Nothing wrong with Isaiah. Truth be told, sometimes when I read the words of Jesus *they* rub me the wrong way too. Doesn’t mean I love Jesus any less. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to follow him or model my life and ministry after him. His words just ... *irritate* me. But you know, scripture *ought* to irritate us. Scripture *ought* to make us stop and say, “Now wait a minute! This doesn’t sound right.” And that’s what this passage from Isaiah does for me.

I guess the reason it irritates me so much is that if I read this and *didn’t* know it was scripture I’d think, “Good grief ... this sounds like some sort of a setup for free handouts or something. That’s not realistic because *nothing* is for free.” It’s what my parents taught me. It’s what I teach my kids. It’s what I hear coming out of my own kids’ mouths when they talk to their friends. Everything comes with a price. Nothing is free. Those letters you get in the mail saying you’ve won something or that you’re going to receive something for free?” Yeah, not really. “Enter for your chance to win a free computer, car, television, vacation ... whatever it is.” Here’s the price you pay for filling out that card or that online survey: First of all, your odds of winning the prize is *low*. On top of that when you give them the information they require for you to enter, you will receive a lifetime supply of junk mail as well as

unwelcome calls from telemarketers at inconvenient times of the day. Or there's, "We'll give you a free dinner if you come hear our sales pitch about the great time shares we're selling." The price you pay? You get stuck in a room with a sales person who will *not* make it easy for you to simply say, "no" and leave the room. Unless your name is Mary Kearns and the sales person is almost-but-not-quite holding your toddler hostage in the child care room. Whereby the Mamma Bear blows up and threatens to do something to the sales person that, while biologically improbable, is not entirely impossible if he does not "bring my son to me right ... *now*." We still managed to get the dinner though. It was pretty good. But ... there was a price to pay, right? On everyone's part.

Everything has a price. Everything you buy. Every public service you receive ... every fire truck, ambulance, paved or unpaved road, streetlight, public school, parking meter, and courthouse. Your tax dollars at work. The same principle works on a very personal level too. Every opinion you offer. Every principle you stand up for. Every favor you receive. Every need you communicate. Every decision you make has ... a ... price. It's a law that's even built into the fabric of our universe. Newton's third law of physics says, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." Everything comes with a price. And yet here's Isaiah claiming that under God's reign, the laws of physics don't apply? It's almost scandalous. And to complicate matters, we humans, especially those who have lived through tough economic times, tend to perceive the world through the filters of scarcity rather than abundance. So not only do we believe that everything come with a price, we also believe that there's no guarantee that even when you *pay* the price that you're going to get whatever it is you *think* you paid for. Those X-ray glasses you ordered from the company whose ad ran on the back of that comic book you bought back in the 60s and 70s? Yeah ... you can't really see through stuff with those. Sea Monkeys? Yeah ... they're brine shrimp. Not intelligent little mer-people.

The truth is that even though we sometimes act like it, we really don't live in a world of genuine scarcity. Even though the world's human population has reached and surpassed the six billion mark, the planet still produces more than enough food to feed everyone abundantly. We talked about this when we studied the first creation story in Genesis. For sure there are parts of the world that have some serious scarcities, but modern transportation gives us the means to distribute all this food but ... only if we have the will to do so. So the reality is that the only genuine scarcity we have in front of us *is* the will to do so. Why? Because that's how things are. In order for supply and demand to work, you need scarcity ... or at least the perception of it. You don't want to miss out on whatever is new and improved, right? If everyone has an abundance of the old thing, you need to fan the flames of desire for the *new* thing. It doesn't work unless you successfully persuade folks to get it "while supplies last."

Then to make matters worse, things are deliberately phased out in order to get people to buy the "new" thing. My laptop, which I bought 7 years ago because it was able to handle my video editing software for the class I teach at Chico Jr. Hi? It runs on Windows Vista. A few months ago, I got a notice that I won't be receiving any more updates, nor will Google update anything because they don't recognize Vista as a valid operating system anymore. Even though it still works great for what I do. But I keep receiving promises of happiness and fulfillment if I just purchase a new computer with the newest version of Windows and the latest video editor. And we know the minute I make that purchase, it will only be a matter of months before it's obsolete and I'll get *more* offers of happiness and fulfillment if only I'd purchase the latest version or update. When you look at it this way, you'd think Isaiah was writing a column for the Wall Street Journal when he says, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Except that if he kept saying things like this I don't think Rupert Murdoch would let him write too many more articles.

So why are we talking about economics, Jesse? That's not your specialty. True. But I happen to think this is a profoundly *spiritual* problem, and that *is* my specialty. Once a person's worldview is shaped by an assumption of scarcity, we bring that assumption to our relationships with ourselves, with one another, and ultimately with God. We start thinking that "resources" like love, and mercy, and acceptance, and contentment are limited commodities too. We think that we have to compete for them and work towards making sure others aren't getting any of the share that only *we* deserve. I think that's why we have so much trouble understanding these biblical images of God pouring out blessings in generous abundance, "in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over," as Jesus says in Luke 6:38. We don't get it because deep down inside we believe that there is no such thing as a free lunch.

But "my thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord, nor are your ways my ways," and for some reason the God who is made known to us in Jesus doesn't seem to *believe* that there's no such thing as a free lunch. Ask the 5,000 folks out in the outback of Judea who had more than enough to eat with five loaves and two fishes, right? "What? This mercy that Isaiah, Jesus and all these other folks speak about in the Bible is offered to *everyone*? Even those who clearly don't deserve it? That's scandalous!" Yup. And the irony of that feeling ... that we've been scandalized ... is that it exposes our arrogance in thinking that we *do* deserve it. Or that at least we're more deserving of it than "those" people. But Jesus just turns around, both grieved and amused by our conceit, and goes right on forgiving us even for our vanity and greed and hard-heartedness. If God's love and mercy and acceptance are abundantly available to even the least deserving, what value can we put on them? This is where our understanding of human "economy" crumbles, and is challenged by a new understanding of divine economy. See, that's bad news, especially when our idea of "winning" means we get to rise up above others and see them lose. It's bad news for those of us who are proud of working so hard and pulling ourselves up by our

bootstraps and proving that we're *more* worthy because of our superior virtue or superior accomplishments. We get the prize, right? That's fair.

And here's the thing: It's not that these things aren't valued in God's economy. God celebrates and delights in all those good and wonderful things we achieve! It's just that God's love and delight and generous blessings are lavished so richly on us already, that *so what* if they're given to others too? There's no scarcity. God's generosity isn't conserved and doled out in carefully measured-out merit-based little handfuls. Jesus invites us into a whole new world of extravagant abundance where we can delight both in our own richness *and* in the richness of our neighbor. And it all begins right here at this table, where a single little piece of cracker and a single little shot of juice are blessed and offered to us by our risen Lord. Sure they're little, but they're not signs of scarcity at all. They're signs of the generous fulfilment of our deepest hungers and hopes.