

God's Expansive Table
Isaiah 25:6-10a, 55:1-5
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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I am certain that I am not the only person who grew up familiar with Norman Rockwell's painting "Freedom from Want." You know the one – it appears to be Thanksgiving Dinner. The family is gathered around the table and the matriarch and patriarch of the family are standing at the head as she places an enormous turkey in front of them.

In my memory the entire table is filled with overflowing dishes of rolls, vegetables, casseroles all awaiting the inevitable spoons diving in. Now when I went back and looked at the painting, I discovered that actually the side dishes weren't as plentiful as my memory told me, the table wasn't as crowded with food in reality as it was in my memory. And yet that painting still represents great abundance to me. Maybe it's the people gathered around the table; maybe it's the size of that turkey!

Overflowing tables are a symbol of many things. It's not just abundance or "freedom from want", as Rockwell titled his painting. But, overflowing tables, especially in a Judeo-Christian context, symbolize welcome and peace and salvation.

Today our reading was actually two pieces of scripture coming from two different places in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the books of prophecy that we find in what we call the Old Testament. Often we think of prophets much like future tellers, but in reality prophets were and are those who speak the truth to power. Isaiah was a prophet who was speaking to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the eighth century B.C.E. At this point in history the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to the great power Assyria. But the Southern Kingdom, home to Jerusalem, was still existing. And they vacillated between the confidence of believing

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that even though their northern sibling had been decimated they would survive, and the fear of living with the possibility that Assyria, to whom they largely functioned as a vassal state, would take them out, too.

It was into this situation that the prophet Isaiah spoke in the earlier chapters of the book, warning the people of Judah as well as nations all around them that their behavior, and in Judah's case their unfaithfulness to Yahweh, was sending them down a road that led to doom. Warning them and other nations, even while reminding them of God's faithfulness and God's ultimate intentions. That – the ultimate intention of God - is the picture we see in our reading from chapter 25.

Now the second reading – Isaiah 55 – comes at a time centuries later, and actually from a later prophet, when Judah has in fact fallen (not to Assyria, but to Babylonia) and many people are living in exile. This is a time when, as you might imagine, prophetic words are words of comfort. The people have already experienced the consequences of their unfaithfulness, so the prophet comes to offer reminders of God's faithfulness.

So, into both of these situations – a time when people were behaving so poorly that they were setting themselves up for failure *and* a time when the worst they could imagine had happened and they were living in the aftermath – into both of these situations come pictures and promises from God. In both of these situations, the bottom line is the same – God is present, God is everlasting, God is for them and God is for everyone.

And there is something that just makes sense about these promises coming in the form of feasts and banquets, in the form of people from different places and histories eating at the same table. It makes sense because ultimately – whether we are struggling to be faithful, whether we are living with the consequences of our unfaithfulness, or whether we are succeeding in living in

the ways of God's heart – ultimately God's intentions are the same...that the whole of the human family be one *and* that everyone has enough.

Today we are celebrating World Communion Sunday. Today we heard voices from around the world, and our table is set with breads from different cultures, with fabrics from countries around the world...all of these reminders that while our distinctions matter because they create us to be who we are, and while they matter because the fabric of the whole human family is richer for our diversity, they are not details intended to divide us but rather something around which we can be brought together. Today is a day when, with sights and sounds and flavors that are different from what we see and hear and taste most weeks, we are reminded that we truly are all one and that we called to be one together.

But what are we to do other than substitute some pita or a piece of tortilla for our usual communion bread? How do we carry this day with us in more than a memory of a beautifully set communion table and words of welcome and scripture heard in languages other than English? How do we live the intention of World Communion Sunday beyond the first Sunday in October?

What clues can get from these texts today?

Our reading from Isaiah 25 begins, “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.”¹ And then it goes on, “And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheets that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.”²

The table is set and all are welcome. And that is our starting place. In order to live the intention of World Communion Sunday we will continue to set the table and we will continue to

¹ Isaiah 25:6, NRSV.

² Isaiah 25:7-8a, NRSV.

invite all people not only to the table but into full fellowship and leadership and ministry, we will continue to welcome all people fully as part of our family. We affirmed a Welcome Statement last week that says this, and one of the ways we will continue to live the intentions of World Communion Sunday is to keep living the truth of it...to keep living from God's expansive table and to keep making it larger and opening it to more and more people.

And this passage from Isaiah talks about a shroud, a sheet that God will destroy. Is that shroud sin? Is it pain? Is it despair? I suspect it is anything that keeps us separated from God and from each other. And so, why not start now? What if we committed to moving from sin to wholeness? What if we worked to move from division to unity? What if we worked to be a source of healing for those who are hurting? Isn't that another way we can live the intention of World Communion Sunday?

And when we look at Isaiah 55 we hear the words, "Ho, 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."³ Later we hear, "See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, become of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel..."⁴

So, what else can we do? We can care for those who are without...we can provide food and shelter and community to those who have none. And not only offer the least, but the best. Did you hear the passage? It starts out saying "come to the waters" but it ends up offering wine and milk. So, too, we are called to live in a way where we are willing to share the best with those who do not have them. And in order to do this best, we are to embrace an attitude of

³ Isaiah 55:1, NRSV.

⁴ Isaiah 55:5, NRSV.

abundance rather than scarcity, to believe and live in ways that say that there is enough for everyone and that we have enough to share.

And we are reminded again and again throughout scripture that the intention of God is an intention for the whole human family. Isaiah talks about nations that do not know each other streaming together to one great banquet. This is a reminder that our family is not made of those who share biology or an address...not made up of those who live nearby, speak the same language, or claim the same nation...but the human family, the family of God, the kin-dom of God is about knowing and living in ways that claim that all, everyone, is family.

Today, on World Communion Sunday, we celebrate God's expansive table. But it is not just for today. Rather the call is for every day, for our whole lives, for us to live in ways that open the table again and again to invite others in. Amen.