

## **“Go Fig-ure”**

Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9

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Several years ago I attended a clergy retreat at Pilgrim Center Camp. I can't remember if there was a particular purpose or theme for the retreat, all I remember is being greatly encouraged to attend by the NW Association Minister.

There are many of my clergy colleagues that I enjoy getting together with one-on-one or in a small group, but large gatherings of clergy can be anxiety producing. We are, to a large extent, an odd lot. You have all no doubt discovered this in spending time with me. We often feel like we need to have others believe we know more than we do and it is frequently the case that we can't just experience things without pointing out all the deeper meanings of an event, or place, or thought.

Having 1 or 2 clergy together pointing out life's sacredness may be a good part of the mix, but when you get 50-60 clergy together all trying to be symbolic and spiritual, well we can even overwhelm and annoy ourselves.

So when I was “encouraged” to go on this clergy retreat, I consented reluctantly, hoping for the best, anticipating being bathed in the deep waters of spiritual meaning.

The first time the whole group assembled was for the evening meal. As we arrived in the dining hall we were asked to form a circle and join hands for grace before we ate. I stood between two clergy I didn't know and I put out my hands to join with theirs. The one on my left clasped my hand in hers, but the clergy woman on my right took my hand and turned it over before taking hold. She said that when you are in a prayer circle with others one of your palms is to be pointing up and the other is to be pointing down. She needed my hand turned over so her hands could be correctly positioned. Then she looked over my other hand and saw that both of my hands were pointing down. As she looked around the circle her system of hands was all mixed up. After she let out a gasp she went around the circle arranging everyone's hands correctly. When she finished, she addressed the whole group saying; “don't you people know that when you get in a circle for prayer one palm is to be up to show your need to receive and the other palm is to be down to show your willingness to give?” Bewildered but compliant we all agreed to do as she instructed.

My worst fears about the weekend retreat were confirmed in these first few minutes of together time, and I prayed for strength and patience while others gave thanks for their food.

Despite all of my exasperation regarding my colleague's need to choreograph our hand holding during grace, to this day I remember what she said and I have come to value her clear illustration of our human need to both receive and to give. There is something about our hearts, minds and spirits that desire opportunities to contribute and to be nourished. The pairing of our two scripture passages for this morning honors both our need to have our thirst quenched and for our lives to bear fruit.

In our Hebrew scripture for this morning the prophet Isaiah is speaking to his people who have been exiled from their homes and country by the Babylonians. Prior to their being conquered, Isaiah kept telling his people, particularly the Hebrew kings, that they were acting unjustly and making alliances with the wrong nations and rulers. The Hebrew kings would not listen to Isaiah, their nation deteriorated and was finally conquered.

Our passage comes from a time when the Hebrew people had been in exile for decades with no real hope of returning to an Israel that they might control. Isaiah, along with Jeremiah and other prophets begin pointing to a new source of hope for their people, they begin saying that God has not forsaken them forever and the path of hope would come from seeking God instead of fearing that God had cursed them.

To the down trodden, the hopeless, the poor, the hungry, Isaiah says: "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 or cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and labor on what does not satisfy?"

Isaiah speaks words of restoration on God's behalf. The people are not promised a return to Israel, in fact Isaiah is directing them to let go of their nostalgia for a by-gone time and place, and to replace it with a relationship to God that is available no matter where they are. Isaiah is replacing nationhood with a new understanding of what it means to be the people of God. "Why labor on what does not and will not satisfy?" Let go of the old in order to move into a hopeful future.

Isaiah is one of the clearest voices in Hebrew scripture. He is clear about the hunger and thirst of his people, and he is clear about what can satisfy their need. Return to God, return to the source and sustainer of life, return to what you were created to be, value what is life-giving and your thirst will be quenched, your hunger will be satisfied.

God's invitation spoken by Isaiah is as available to us as it was the exiled Israelites some 2,500 years ago. God says to us, "Come all who are thirsty, come and drink without cost, come and eat and be satisfied." This is a powerful invitation, it is confounding and engaging, and if we pay attention we can taste what is being offered.

I believe the quenching water comes in unexpected sips and we need to drink them in when they come. Let me illustrate a little of what I mean.

When I was in Biloxi, MS after hurricane Katrina had ravaged the coast, I saw a church that had been completely destroyed. In a newsreel about the church I heard one of the parishioners say – “we will miss our building, but our church is our gathered people and Katrina did not destroy that.” This person’s words were like a sip of water to me.

When I recently read about the success of a young man going through our counties judicial system program of restitution and reconciliation instead of punitive incarceration, it was, like a sip of quenching water for me.

When I see acts of courage like the Lutheran church voting to ordain qualified gay and lesbian individuals; or acts of generosity toward the suffering in Haiti; or acts of compassion toward people in nursing homes that can never be repaid – these are all sips to me that touch my heart and fill my soul. I believe God’s invitation “to come to the waters” happens through sips like these.

When our hands are stretched out with our palms up, we can receive God’s invitation and our thirst can be satisfied.

But life is not just about receiving, it is also about gifts we have to offer. Our spirits find meaning in contributing from our substance as well.

Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree to illustrate that the natural order of life is for each part of creation to contribute its particular fruit – this includes human beings.

When Jesus spoke of the need to repent, he was speaking of the human need to give so that the world and the giver might experience the richness of doing so.

Victor Frankl wrote that even in the midst of great tragedy people can experience hope if we can find something meaningful in it. Hopelessness and depression find fertile ground when we find no purpose in life.

We have been created with the need to be purposeful, when we feel we are useless or unable to contribute in meaningful ways our spirits suffer. When I have gone to visit people who are significantly debilitated for long lengths of time one of the most painful things they say is: “what good am I, what do I have to contribute?”

Because of their words I think it is very important to consider what it means to contribute. If we define “contributing” in too narrow a way then few of us will have something to offer throughout our lives. If we define contributing in too limited a way we might dismiss the

gift of the woman with the two copper coins who Jesus said contributed more than all the rest.

With a broad understanding of offering our gifts, a kind word, a song to lift our spirits or weeks of labor to rebuild a person's home, we are created with the need to offer others and the world something of our substance, and when we don't our lives wither along with the world.

Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree that isn't producing any fruit. The owner of the tree tells the gardener to cut it down, but the gardener asks the owner if she can dig around its roots and fertilize to see if she can get it to bear fruit. The story is really about the gardener who wants a chance to help the tree bear fruit. The gardener is unwilling to give up quickly. The gardener maintains the importance of bearing fruit, but she also knows that trees need some help at times.

The parable is a story of confrontation and hope. It confronts those who condemn and add burdens to the lives of others, and it points to the hope that everyone will offer the gifts they have so life can flourish. The gardener seeks our better nature, our generous nature, our compassionate nature. One of our hands is to be stretched out palm down so that we can give of ourselves, in this way the flow of God's spirit and kingdom comes in and through us – we are receivers and givers, in this way we experience real abundance.