

Isaiah 55:1-9

¹Ho, 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.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;

⁷let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9

¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Seek the Lord While He May Be Found

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: March 14, 2004

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Texts: *Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9*

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Things get all mixed up. Isaiah says that people fill themselves with what neither satisfies nor nourishes. They fill themselves and remain empty.

Isaiah wrote a very long time ago, but perhaps more than to any other time, his words apply to ours. For in this day we surely spend and labor for that which does not satisfy.

In 1997 the PBS station in Oregon developed a program called *Affluenza*. They suggested that excessive affluence is a disease, a disease that takes both a global and personal toll. To demonstrate the problem they developed a very interesting quiz. I'd like to share some of the questions and answers with you this morning. Maybe you will find them as enlightening as I did.

1. Which of the following is comparable to the size of a typical three-car garage?

- a. a basketball court
- b. a McDonald's restaurant
- c. an "RV" (recreational vehicle)
- d. the average home in the 1950s.

Answer: d. Many of today's three-car garages occupy 900 square feet, just about the average size of an entire home in the 1950s. Many people use the extra garage space to store things they own and seldom use. And they are working more and going into greater debt to do it

4. True or false? Americans carry \$1 billion in personal debt, not including real estate and mortgages.

Answer: False. Americans carry \$1 trillion in personal debt, approximately \$4,000 for every man, woman and child, not including real estate and mortgages. On average, Americans save only 4 percent of their income, in contrast to the Japanese, who save an average of 16 percent.

5. Which activity did more Americans do in 1996?

- a. graduate from college

b. declare bankruptcy

Answer: b. In 1996, more than 1 million Americans declared bankruptcy, three times as many as in 1986. Americans have more than 1 billion credit cards, and less than one-third of credit card holders pay off their balances each month.

6. In the industrialized world, where is the U.S. ranked in terms of its income equality between the rich and the poor? (First being the most income-equal.)

- a. 1st
- b. 5th
- c. 12th
- d. 22nd

Answer: d. The income disparity between the rich and the poor is greatest in the United States.

7. The world's 358 billionaires together possess as much money as the poorest _____ of the world's population?

- a. 15 percent
- b. 30 percent
- c. 50 percent
- d. 10 percent

Answer: c. Nearly 50 percent. The world's 358 billionaires' combined assets roughly equal the assets of the world's poorest 2.5 billion people.

8. Since 1950, Americans alone have used more resources than:

- a. everyone who ever lived before them
- b. the combined Third World populations
- c. the Romans at the height of the Roman Empire
- d. all of the above

Answer: All of the above. Since 1950, Americans alone have used more resources than everyone who ever lived before them. Each American individual uses up 20 tons of basic raw materials annually. Americans throw away 7 million cars a year, 2 million plastic bottles an hour and enough aluminum cans annually to make six thousand DC-10 airplanes.

9. Americans' total yearly waste would fill a convoy of garbage trucks long enough to:

- a. wrap around the Earth six times
- b. reach half-way to the moon
- c. connect the North and South Poles
- d. build a bridge between North America and China

Answer: a. and b. Even though Americans comprise only five percent of the world's population, in 1996 we used nearly a third of its resources and produced almost half of its hazardous waste.

The average North American consumes five times as much as an average Mexican, 10 times as much as an average Chinese and 30 times as much as the average person in India.

2. The percentage of Americans calling themselves "very happy" reached its highest point in what year?

- a. 1957
- b. 1967
- c. 1977
- d. 1987

Answer: a. The number of "very happy" people peaked in 1957, and has remained fairly stable or declined ever since. Even though we consume twice as much as we did in the 1950s, people were just as happy when they had less.

12. Of the Americans who voluntarily cut back their consumption, what percent said (in 1995) that they are happier as a result?

- a. 29 percent
- b. 42 percent
- c. 67 percent
- d. 86 percent

Answer: d. Eighty-six percent of Americans who voluntarily cut back their consumption feel happier as a result. Only 9 percent said they were less happy. In 1996, 5 percent of the "baby boom" generation reported practicing a strong form of voluntary simplicity. By the year 2000, some predict this number will rise to 15 percent. ¹

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Isaiah offers us another way. He says:

¹Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
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Isaiah is speaking to us. He knows that we hunger and thirst after something more satisfying than so many of the things we seem to strive for. And he knows that the money we ordinarily use to try to buy our happiness won't do the job. But he offers a riddle. Isaiah says, come and eat; come and buy wine and milk to drink; come, even though the riches you have cannot buy them.

¹Adapted from: <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/diag/what.html>

The problem isn't just that the riches we have won't buy the things we really need. More than that they seem to get in the way. That's why 86% of those who cut back on their consumption were actually became happier. Simplifying. Un-cluttering our lives. Getting back to basics. It sounds so trite, but it is so true.

The generations that lived in the great depression often had a cut-back, simplified lifestyle forced on them. And to be sure, it was hard in many ways. But the stories I have heard from my parents and grandparents, stories that were more honest than nostalgia for the good old days, spoke of the hardship, but they also spoke of the happiness of those days. I think especially of my mother's family, a dirt poor preacher's family in rural and poor central Louisiana.

Greg Brown, the gravelly voiced folk singer, paints the picture for me in his poignant song, "The Cheapest Kind," where he tells of a similar family. The first part of the lyrics go like this:

We traveled Kansas and Missouri spreading the good news
A preachers family in our pressed clothes and worn out polished shoes
Momma fixed us soup beans and served them up by candlelight
She tucked us in at night
Oh she worried through many a sleepless night
Dad and me would stop by the store when the day was done
Standin at the counter he said "I forgot to get the peaches, son."
"What kind should I get?" I said to him there where he stood in line
And he answered just like I knew he would "Go and get the cheapest kind"

But the love, the love, the love
It was not the cheapest kind
It was rich as, rich as, rich as ,rich as, rich as
Any you could ever find

86% were happier when they simplified, when they had less. Simply by simplifying our lives we can go a long way toward living more richly. In the printed version of this sermon there is the link to the web site for the PBS show. It has lots of good ideas for living more slowly and more simply. Also, a book called *The Simple Living Guide* has gotten very good reviews. You can buy it through the church website.

So, we can have a lot more of life by having a lot less – a lot less stuff, a lot less busyness, a lot less being in a rush. But, of course, subtraction isn't the whole story. The point is that having a lot less of some things opens space for more of the things that really count.

Family and relationships, for example. Currently Americans spend 29 minutes a day watching advertisements on television; that's not watching television; that's 29 minutes a day just watching commercials, and they spend 12 minutes a day talking to their spouses.

And it's not just relationships with those close to us that really count. Community service, public service, the practice of generosity, helping out actually makes us happier people. When Jesus says it is more blessed to give than receive, he is talking every bit as much about blessings you will have now as you will have in heaven. Next Sunday after church you can join Jed for the Outdoor Church on Cambridge Common. You may want to go along. North-Prospect Church is praying about and in the process of creating a vision for the future, and it needs your generosity

in every way. As Peter Gomes often says to his congregation at Memorial Church, we have all the money and resources we need to do great and exciting ministry in this place. To paraphrase Pogo, we have met the resources, and they are us. All it takes is open-hearted generosity, open-heartedness that will do a better job than Lipitor in clearing out the internal blockages and delivering a better quality of life to you.

And finally, when we have a lot less stuff and a lot more simplicity, we can make room for the deep spiritual questions and yearnings that are inside all of us. It's a little scary sometimes, a little scary to actually encounter our deepest questions and yearnings, to encounter God. Moses and many others after him, you will remember, were a bit resistant at first. But at the end of his life, as he handed over the reigns to Joshua, he offered Israel a blessing, a blessing that he understood his own life to have enjoyed as well: "Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph!"

But all this ends with a caution. Isaiah says, "Seek the Lord while he may be found." And Jesus in the Gospel of Luke puts the point on the meaning of that verse. There was the barren fig tree in the garden. The fig tree had a million possessions, it shopped at the mall, it had a mansion for a home, with a three-car garage, and it had a job that demanded everything of it. But the fig tree was barren; it produced no good fruit.

The owner of the tree said, "Cut it down." But the gardener pleaded for just one more year. Let me cultivate it and fertilize it and see if it will produce. Just give me a year.

Jesus means to emphasize that you can't wait forever. Time flies by. And soon enough, like Moses at the end of his life, you have only the past. There are no more chances. At that point, at that point when we remember, and when we are remembered, will they say, Ah yes, that fig tree lived abundantly; that fig tree produced fine fruit. And will we ourselves say, I have no regrets; I have spent my money and my time on real bread; I have labored for that which satisfies?

Brothers and sisters, seek the Lord while he may yet be found. Seek the Lord. Amen.