

ARE YOU SATISFIED?

TEXT: Isaiah 55:1-13; Luke 15:11-32

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on November 14, 2021

I'm going start by naming a bunch of different everyday situations and if I name one that applies to you, raise your hand.

- have a box of things in your home that you haven't opened in more than five years
- bought something at a yard sale or church faire that you later sold at a yard sale or church faire
- bought a car that you didn't like six months later
- bought exercise equipment that now serves a decorative or storage function
- own more than 10 books you have never read
- have anything in your closet more than a year old with the tags still on it
- own a power tool you have never actually used on a project
- have ever needed a vacation from your vacation
- have an object in your house that you have specifically kept because you know it must go to something, but you're not sure what
- bought something you didn't want because somebody else thought you should

I took you through that so that you can hear the question God asks in Isaiah 55: 2. "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" It's not asked in judgment, but in bewilderment...What are you people doing? asks God. Why would you buy things that don't nourish you or feed your soul? Why would you work so hard for something that leaves you cold? You work 24/7 so you can get more money and you throw away all that money on stuff that leaves you harried and anxious, tired and unsatisfied. Why? God is completely baffled by our behavior.

The prophets are always pointing out things like that—from our own folly and foibles to the corruption and injustice that so easily takes root while we're chasing after the next shiny object that never satisfies us once we get it. We now have billion-dollar industries focused entirely on convincing us that we will be lesser human beings if we don't buy this thing or experience or drug that we almost certainly don't need, and likely never wanted until the ad campaign convinced us that we did. We fall for it every time, and have been falling for it since well before the prophet Isaiah pointed it out in the 8th century BCE.

What the prophets throw in our faces, Jesus likes to point out in parables, and the one I think is closest to making Isaiah's point is the one just read about the father who had two sons, generally known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. The main point of the parable is about the unconditional love of the dad, who is the God figure in the story, and in context, the parable is the capstone to three parables about lost things—a lost sheep, a lost coin, and finally, the lost son. Luke 15 is sometimes called the "Lost" chapter for that reason.

But the adjacent story of the two brothers is also quite rich as it's often easier to see ourselves in one or both of them than in the father. By focusing on the brothers, we gain insight about how we can become

lost in the first place. And it's in the actions and attitudes of those two young men that we find the folly of our quest for satisfaction in things outside of ourselves.

In both the Isaiah passage and the passage about the prodigal or lost son, the driving need is nourishment. It's when a famine strikes and the prodigal finds himself hungry and eating pig slop that he remembers the nourishment in his father's house. He returns home because he is literally starving. Isaiah is warning the people that they are headed down the same road as the prodigal. They are not being nourished...they are spiritually starving in the midst of the abundance that God has provided.

Both of the brothers in the parable live in the same house. At the beginning, the elder brother is satisfied with his lot, but the younger is not. He has wanderlust. There is greener grass somewhere and he wants to find it. The family has means. They have servants. And the youngest son has such a sense of entitlement that he stomps all over the taboos of the day and demands his share of the family inheritance, while his father is still very much alive. He's not content to wait out his father's lifetime to receive what he did not earn. There's money there that will come to him and he wants it now. In a shocking move, that some would call extremely gracious and others would call enabling, the father gives it to him, and off he goes.

No doubt dad knew how this would likely turn out. His son has had no experience managing either money or his own appetites, and he's blown the whole thing in short order, forced to take a job slopping pigs. And then a famine hits. He's already as low as he can get, and with no money left and no food for himself, it begins to dawn on him that he had it pretty good back home. But there's more.

We see that he not only has a new appreciation for the life he had back home, but he's done some soul-searching as well. He knows that the insult he gave to his father by asking for his inheritance early was unlikely to be forgiven. He had basically wished his father dead and considered him a useless relic apart from his money. He's not going back to make demands this time. Instead, he decides he'll go back and see if he can get a job as a servant in his father's household. He has given up his sense of entitlement.

We might think the elder brother is a better son. He has not insulted his father and appears to be satisfied with his lot. Until his brother comes home. The older brother clearly expects that his sibling will get what he deserves on his arrival. But when dad greets him, not only with full love and forgiveness, but with a huge feast and gifts, it's suddenly the elder brother's turn to be unsatisfied. We see now that the older brother has been grading on a curve.

He's been satisfied because, as the eldest, he has gotten all the perks of that position in an ancient, patriarchal culture. His brother got his share of the inheritance, but the older brother would, according to custom, be getting more anyway. Life was good; he'd wait it out. But now that his kid brother is getting rewarded for his bad behavior with feasts and rings and robes, the trade-off isn't looking so good anymore.

He approaches his father about it and dad is bewildered. The elder brother could have had a party like that whenever he wanted. He could have rings and robes to spare. Why shouldn't there be a celebration of his brother who has come to his senses and realized the value of the non-material things he gave up when he went in search of greener pastures?

In the parable, the elder brother never gets over this. He is now dissatisfied with his lot, and we can see that neither brother began by understanding what satisfaction really was. Both of them thought it meant having whatever material things they desired and the freedom to do with that what they wanted.

For the older brother, he also drew satisfaction from being the oldest child, which, like the wealth he would inherit, had nothing whatsoever to do with his own actions or abilities. He just happened to be born

first in a family of means in a culture that valued that birth position over any of his siblings in both material and non-material ways.

The only person in the parable who is satisfied is the father. While he was deeply disappointed in his youngest son's initial choice, he didn't fight it. He let it be, hoping that his son would come to learn what really mattered and come home. He also didn't fight him when he came back or try to make him pay. The father was satisfied the entire time, even through great offense and sorrow, because he was grounded in what really mattered—loving relationship.

The father was then saddened by his older son, who showed that he didn't yet know what his younger brother had learned. But again, the father didn't fight his oldest son. He tried to assure the elder brother of the unconditional loving relationship that surrounded him; but it would be left to some future story and some future time for that brother to learn that it is the loving relationship that satisfies and nothing else.

That is also the promise of Isaiah 55: "Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." And what is that rich food? we might ask. The next verse has the answer. "Incline 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."

Remember that covenant is the way that family relationship is extended to others. The chapter goes on to say that all nations will run toward that loving covenant, and reminds the people that God's ways are not like human ways; just as the God-figure in the parable of the Lost Son is concerned with different things than the two brothers.

The loving provision that goes out from God's abundance—seed to the sower and bread to the eater—will result not only in human joy and peace, but also "the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

Wholeness for the earth and all that is in it IF we can set aside our ways of trying to gain and achieve more and more and find our satisfaction in loving relationship with one another and the earth that provides the conduit for God's abundance.

Isaiah is recalling the curse in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden for their unwillingness to simply refrain from one kind of fruit in the garden. Nope, like the younger son in the parable, they wanted all of it. As a result, God says to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Isaiah 55 offers a way out of all that. No more sweating to eat bread from the ground that only produces thorns and thistles. "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. Why 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. Incline 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."

But to get there we have to come to the point of the lost son and realize that we're chasing after all the wrong things. It's not about how hard we work. If we're working for the wrong things, we'll just produce thorns and thistles. But if we are working to create a beloved community of unconditional loving

relationship, we no longer have to sweat. Then we are working WITH the earth instead of against it. The mountains will sing and the trees will clap and those thorns and briar patches will turn to cypress and myrtle. Joy and peace lie in that way—the way that doesn't cost a dime, because love doesn't cost a dime.

And the good news is that Crawford gets that. Last week we had guests to celebrate the new firepit and for several of them, last Sunday was the first time in their entire lives that they had attended a church service of any kind. They literally had not set foot in a church before except as a tourist. As we cooked s'mores and talked around the firepit after worship last week, one woman was sharing her experience with me and trying to make sense of what church was. Then a lightbulb went off, "It seems like it's about community," she said. And then she went further, "and what we provided is another place for community to happen." I wanted to dance around the fire pit.

For all of our angst and woes, for all of our worries about our budget deficit, staff openings, and other concerns; what exists here is the core of what matters. People who had no experience or expectations of church whatsoever came out of last week's service and said, "Oh, so it's about community." Good job, Crawford! The rich food that will bring joy, peace, and satisfaction is to be found in cultivating the seeds of loving community we have here. Love and inclusion and welcome; that is the wine and milk we can offer without money and without price. If we can keep it up, and grow those seeds, we shall go out with joy and be led back in peace. And we will be satisfied, just as we are. Amen.