

Sermon on 3 Lent C: Isaiah 55:1-9

Custer Lutheran Fellowship: March 11, 2007, by Pastor David Van Kley

### **THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE...**

Brian—I can use his first name because I'm confident none of you will ever meet him—Brain certainly would agree with the old proverb, "The best things in life are free." I met him the other night, after the sheriff's department called the church, indicating that a transient was in need of assistance. Around 40, Brian has burns over 50% of his body, the result of a drug-induced house fire. With no family to care for or work to hold him, he'd set off from Wisconsin in the dead of winter, hitchhiking west. For two solid months he'd been on the road, heading west, sleeping overnight in towns like Custer. He goes to the Sheriff's department, allows them to do a background check, and then asks the ministerial association for a free meal and room. In all but two cases, the strategy worked. On Sunday, again: the Ministerial Association paid for his room and CLF bought him a large pizza and a 2 liter bottle of pop.

There is something despicable about people like Brian, who are willing to leach off of other people, instead of supporting themselves. Yet, there is also something strangely admirable about them. After all, would you want to be Brian? To depend on someone else for daily bread, beg for your meals, trudge along snowy roads in subzero temperatures, your thumb extended? It would take a special blend of courage, desperation, and faith to do such a thing. I suppose it doesn't hurt to have a few screws loose as well!

When was your last truly free lunch? In April, Lutheran Social Services puts on their annual free dinner at the Ramkota. But, as Les and Wanda McClanahan—who have attended the event forever, will tell you—the dinner isn't exactly **free**. Because after the food is served and the speakers are heard, the pledge cards are passed out and, well, it turns out to be a fairly expensive evening. It's a fundraising gimmick and we accept that, because we wish to support LSS. But a free meal it's not.

The youth group in the last church I served held an annual dinner for the community. We **tried** to make it free. But people had a hard time understanding that. Here's a donation," they'd say. "We don't want it," we'd respond; "it's free." And they'd look at you, totally baffled. Later, someone figured out that if we took the donations, it would be easier to take trips to places like South Dakota, and so we put out a basket and the meal wasn't free anymore.

In today's reading from Isaiah, it sounds like Someone—namely **God**—is offering a free lunch. "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." Yet, the food Isaiah was talking about did not consist of proteins and carbs. He was speaking of a heartier meal for a deeper appetite—a free lunch for the soul. "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, eat what is good, delight yourselves in rich food."

Living in Babylon, the people of Israel had given up on God and had given in to the culture of their captors. They had come to believe that the best things in life were **not** free, but could be earned by labor or education, could be bought with money. They'd learned to fit in with the Babylonian "consumers" around them.

Years ago, I remember hearing a sermon on this text by theologian Walter Bruggeman in which he summed up the bread which we seek in the United States in one word: **Nike**. He meant that we Americans try to buy our happiness through possession of the material things our culture values. We're willing to pay extra for those tennis shoes with the checkmark of success on them. It's not only the tennis shoes, but college degrees, real property, perfect figures, dream vacations, comfortable retirements. We want it all. And we believe we can have it all, if only we can write a check large enough to pay for it all.

But that which satisfies the **soul** cannot be bought or earned, Isaiah says. It is already purchased—already paid for—by Another. This rich food is the gift of God's very self to us and everything that comes with that. This rich food is the Bread of Life, the One whose love at once judges and frees the world. In Christ, God provides a banquet of forgiveness and love, hope and justice. But we cannot pay for it; we can only accept it, can only stake our lives on it. Strangely: like Brian.

The supreme irony is this: the things we work the hardest for ultimately do not satisfy us, while that which is given to us for nothing finally counts for everything.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts," says the Lord, "nor are my ways your ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." How high **are** the heavens above the earth? When you look at the night sky, the light from some of the brightest stars began its journey a thousand years ago, at 186,000 miles per **second!** My goodness, the heavens are high above the earth! That's how much higher God's ways are than our ways. There's no comparison. It's like apples and oranges or better, apples and **planets!**

Because we are human, we think that those things we can touch with our hands—and put it into our wallets—are most important. We need reminding that it is not so. So we are called to repent of our near-sightedness and return to the Lord our God.

I just returned from a mission trip to Colombia. If you wonder why I spend my money on such things, I think it's because these journeys force me to see myself and the world differently.

This time, I stayed with an older couple named Olga and Jose, who know about as much English as I know Spanish. Somehow, we got by! I was delayed 15 hours arriving in Bogotá, yet when I walked out of the terminal, there they were, holding a sign that read: "Welcome, Mr. David Van Kley." From that point, I was swept off my feet by their

hospitality. They fed me like a king—such good food and so much of it! In fact, Olga introduced me at church on Sunday by saying: “He’s a good house guest. He eats everything I put in front of him.” It wasn’t just the food. When I’d take a shower in the morning, there were sandals waiting for me outside the door. The day we painted a room in a church building, they gave me painting clothes, along with medicine, in case I started to feel sick. They took me to museums and restaurants, showed me the town. It didn’t seem right to me—it was **too** much. I kept offering them money, wanting to pay something. But Olga would say, “don’t worry, be happy.” If only she knew how much I hated that song!

I gradually figured out that they were **never** going to let me pay for anything. And that, if I was going to enjoy myself, I would have to simply and graciously accept their hospitality. Which I did. And then I began to do things for them and even to buy a few things for them, not in exchange for their generosity, but in gratitude for it. Within the space of six days, complete strangers became my dearest friends.

I thought, maybe this is the way it is with God. Faith is learning that you can do nothing to earn God’s overwhelming goodness. Faith is learning to accept God’s gifts graciously and to enjoy them. Faith is giving yourself away generously; because you are so full of gratitude you can’t help it.

It’s like a dance with a partner who knows what to do. She or he takes the lead. It’s surprising—clumsy as you are—but you find yourself following along, keeping time to a joyful rhythm, an amazing grace.

Someone has said that we at Custer Lutheran Fellowship should put on a free meal to welcome the foreign workers who spend the summer in our motels and restaurants. And that every month, we should invite the community to Wednesday night supper and not charge them a cent. I like those ideas because they reflect the One who says to us, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. You that have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.” Amen.