

## The Richest of Fare

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With the demise of the Wisconsin Badgers Basketball team (don't get me started), my mind turned this weekend to the Milwaukee Brewers and baseball. And that got me thinking of the new bag of peanuts I just bought from the Pig to get me through the tournament (oh well!), and that got me thinking of the vendor from Miller Park, who had his 15 minutes of fame because of his unique invitation to buy "Peanuts! Peanuts here!". Well, that is what I think Isaiah had in mind in Isaiah 55: a street vendor calling out 'Hey! Water! Water Here! Everyone's who's thirsty, get your water now!'"

Unlike Miller Park food items, though, the cost is not \$5 for \$1 of food; it is free! There is a really annoying commercial, annoying but effective, I guess, where all of the answers to a quiz show are 'Free!' Free, free, free. Get it? The service being advertised is free. Just think how many people would 'buy' peanuts at Miller Park if the vendor said, "Free peanuts here!" And he would explain, they are paid for, mister, so for you, it's "Free, free, free!"

God's invitation through Isaiah is that the water and milk and wine are all free; along with food, and not just any food, the richest of food. A banquet table of the finest yield of the harvest, and it's all free, free, free!

The journey to the Banquet leaves today. You are invited! Your taste buds will be thanking you forever. Join the journey!

And yet. And yet. "I'm busy that day." "My back hurts today, maybe tomorrow." "It'll probably be too hot there." "All that sunshine and music will give me a headache." God has heard them all.

(SLIDE) So it is that God sends the Prophet with a message to be called out in a loud, peanut vendor's voice and with the urgency of a street vendor who cannot go home without one more sale: "Come, all who are thirsty, come to the waters."

Now here is an important qualification, right? You have to be thirsty in order to really hear this invitation. If we aren't thirsty then we will say, 'well, what kind of water? I like the water that comes in those big bottles with the flip-top. Is that what you have?' But, on the other hand, if we know we are really thirsty, or if we understand, like people in the desert air, you *are* really thirsty even if you don't feel thirsty, then we will say, "Water, please!" Trust me, friends, you are thirsty!

"And you who have no money, come buy and eat.", the vendor calls out. You see, you cannot buy this food. It isn't for sale. The fortunes of Bezos, Buffett and Gates combined could not buy one morsel of this bread. The rich and wise, when hearing such an invitation would be skeptical. They would call in their accountants and attorneys and ask them how they are able to offer free food, and what will this do to the economy? The poor and hungry, they would just say, "Thank you!" Trust me friends, you are poor and hungry, gobble up this free food.

(SLIDE) "Why spend money and labor on what does not satisfy?" So, at the end of hard week of work, are you feeling like, 'yes, all of that effort was worth it. I now feel like I have everything I need.'? All of our scheming and striving, all of our perfect planning, it will not bring us any closer to the blessings God offers than if we do nothing. There is no strategic plan which has ever been devised which will bring the blessings of salvation which God freely offers through the expensive blood of Christ shed on the cross.

We are offered the richest of fare, which is the forgiveness of sins and pardon from our sinful condition. This is water and food that God alone can offer. But the richest of fare are tangible goods too. Jesus does teach us to pray for our daily bread, after all. The tangible blessings you have: water, milk, wine; bread, steak, even brats, these are from the Lord, because he wants you to enjoy life. Get a life! A life in which you experience the richest of fare, which is available only through God and only for free.

(SLIDE) So, the prophet calls out again, 'Listen!' What I am offering you is not an empty promise that will fade away, I am offering you a pathway so that you may live. This is an invitation which takes us away from the land of despair to the land of life. What is worse than believing you are trapped in your situation with no way out? What is more depressing than thinking you will die a captive to a life which brings you to tears? "Listen, that you may live!"

God has made for you and everlasting covenant, a promise that God initiates and God carries out. You remember the covenant ceremony with Abraham, where God walks through the bloody trail of the sacrificed animals while Abraham sits by watching? That is what we are talking about. God has taken this journey in Christ, and you are invited to follow. Why? Because God is a God of faithful love. God loves you! Do you think God wants you to live in captivity forever? Do you not see that the love of God will draw you out?

In our beautiful Reformed theology there is a doctrine we call "Irresistible Grace." When God knew you in the womb he placed a magnet inside of you which is attracted by grace, and so it is that once you accept the invitation to this journey home you will be irresistibly attracted by God's grace. The magnet of God's love attracts the love God placed in you, and the magnetic field that draws you toward God is called grace. (I am not a scientist, so that may be a really bad analogy, but you get the idea, right?)

Now, if we are to begin this journey, if we are to accept this invitation to experience the richest blessings we can know in this life, it begins with repentance. (SLIDE) We need to repent of the ways in which we have tried to be our own gods, or the ways we have substituted other gods, other idols, for the one true God. We need to seek forgiveness for refusing to accept God's invitation.

How do we do that? Well, this is the hard part, right? This is difficult for us, because (a) we don't like change; and (b), we really don't like change if it involves changing ourselves. We can agree, in general, that getting rid of sinful attitudes and behaviors is good...so long as this is about other people.

Transformational change is necessary though if we are to ever experience the richest of fare that awaits us on the Banquet Table. It begins (SLIDE) with seeking God. God is near,

despite our behaviors and attitude, God is near and all we need to do is seek God rather than false gods. Then we need to call on God. "God, I know you are there. Help me to find you!"

And then the real transformation begins. We agree to forsake the sinful acts which have bound us in chains. I know that I tell you every week that your sins are forgiven. But, I also tell you, in Jesus' words, now go and sin no more. That means we agree to turn, to walk away from the temptations that cause us to remain in captivity, in our own little Babylons. But if we will forsake those ways and turn we will be drawn from Babylon, the place of exile and captivity, to the Promised Land, full of the richest fare.

Why will that happen? Because God promises he will have mercy, that he will freely pardon. This is the richest of fare that awaits you if you will turn your face toward God and seek him while he still can be found.

(SLIDE) How can this be true? Because God is God and we are not. God has thoughts that only God can think. God has ways of accomplishing things that we cannot imagine. When God speaks his word, that word will in fact accomplish what God desires it to accomplish. God's invitation, the word spoken to you, come and drink and eat the richest of fare I have prepared for you; know the blessings of life I have designed for you; those words are guaranteed to give you life, because God wins.

One ancient writer describes the certain success of this Word, Jesus:

"For...he shall come down like rain and snow, and through him all that is sown shall spring up and bear righteous fruit, and the word shall return to his sender; but not in vain shall his going have been, but thus shall he say in the presence of his sender, "Behold, I and the children that the Lord has given me." And this is the voice through which the dead shall live. And this is the voice of God that shall sound from on high and raise up all the dead."

Jesus is leading the parade which brings us to the blessings of home, a present and future reality. And it is a journey which will be unlike any you have ever taken. (SLIDE) You will go out in joy; Jesus will lead you forth in peace. You will hear creation sing over you, joining you in the hymns of praise to Jesus as we walk to the soaring notes of mountains and hills, as we pass through the rhythmic clapping of forests of tree, we enter the land where we see spring in full bloom.

(SLIDE) God promises to provide us, his repentant children, the richest of fare, blessings we have not yet imagined, as we follow a leader who has already made the journey home. And then God will be praised.

God is going to do this because the blessings we receive are not only for our benefit, but so that the world will know God, and his renown will draw all nations to God's self! The nations will stream into the new Land, people from a thousand lands speaking a thousand languages, bearing the skin tones of God's color palate will gather to drink the water for which we all thirst, and to eat the bread for which we all hunger, the richest of fare.