3/23-24/19 Convincing Grace Rev. Amy Haines

Isaiah 55:1-9 Lent

There are four words that every student of higher education loves- “FREE FOOD AND DRINK”

Sometimes students are sick and tired of dorm food. Sometimes students are living on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to make their dollars stretch. So anytime students see the words—

“Free Food and Drink” those words mean that someone cares.

For years, twice a quarter on the first Friday of the month, Summit on 16th, a United Methodist Church in Columbus, collaborated with other organizations to serve breakfast to hundreds of students as a deterrent to drinking, violence and assault. Their Jericho Road Breakfasts or "Church Breakfast," as it's often called, served over 50,000 students.

--summitumc.org (current as of 2014)

In Bowling Green on the last Friday night of every month, Trinity United Methodist Church

served pancakes, sausage, and the love of Jesus to college students heading downtown from 11pm- 2 am. --bgtrinity.org (current as of 2013)

Sometimes the students were hesitant to step inside the church doors, even if the food was free. They wondered if there was a catch to receiving the free meal. If they would first have to listen to a lecture or a sermon. If it was simply a ploy to get on a mailing list.

Yet there was no lecture, no sermon, no ploy. Instead, for one night all were welcome, both those up late partying and those up late studying, all invited to come and eat without money and without price.

I imagine the Israelites who first heard today’s words from the prophet Isaiah were as hesitant as first-year college students to believe in a free meal. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price? Come back to God and live?

Our Israelite ancestors had spent years in exile, many as slaves, believing that God was punishing them. Now they were about to travel home to the Promised Land, a land they only knew about through hushed whispers passed down through the generations. They would have had little money, and fewer possessions. They knew that the great city of Jerusalem lay in ruins.

Even though their identity was as God’s people, they struggled to believe that God still cared for them. They struggled to still believe in God’s promises. They struggled to feel worthy to receive such an invitation from Isaiah, an invitation to repent and believe and receive God’s provisions.

They knew Isaiah’s invitation was about more than bread and milk, wine and honey. They knew Isaiah’s invitation was also a reminder of who and whose they were, an invitation to reclaim their heritage through returning to faith in the God of their ancestors. They knew Isaiah’s invitation was also a reminder of God’s mighty love for them, love shown through forgiveness and mercy, through compassion and care, through the promise of pardon and the promise of God’s rich feast. They knew all of this, yet they struggled to believe.

In many ways, we are still like our faith ancestors. Isaiah’s invitation is still relevant for our lives today. Yet how much do we struggle to believe it?

How much do we struggle to see ourselves as God’s beloved? How much do we struggle to accept God’s love for us simply because it is God’s nature to love, not because we’ve done anything to earn such love? How often do we struggle to feel worthy enough to be in an ongoing relationship with God, and thus are fearful to begin in such a relationship?

Throughout our faith history, human beings have always struggled to believe in the richness of God’s love for us. We are no different today.

Because of these struggles, this Lenten season we are reflecting on God’s amazing grace.

We have defined this grace as the gift of God’s unconditional love for us.

As United Methodists who follow in the footsteps of John Wesley, grace is a central component of our faith journey, as we believe God’s grace is present throughout our lives, a grace that never stops reaching out to us in love. The grace of God is active before we are ever aware of it,

leads us to faith in Jesus, then encourages us to live by our Christian faith the rest of our earthly lives.

We began this Lenten journey of grace by giving thanks for God’s prevenient grace, the grace that comes before we are ever aware of God. Before we know God’s name, before we know anything about Jesus, God is loving us, reaching out to us, drawing us into a deeper awareness of who God is and who we are as God’s beloved. This grace will be/has been tangibly present in worship this weekend as Barrett Sibert will be claimed by God through the water of baptism.

Prevenient grace is the good news that God loves us no matter what, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God will always seek to love us into a relationship with God,

through faith in Jesus.

Last weekend we gave thanks that prevenient grace leads to justifying grace, when we become aware of God’s love for us as evidenced in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Such awareness leads us to faith in Jesus, and is shown to us through the forgiveness of our sins and God’s acceptance of us.

Once we have received justifying grace, we begin a lifelong journey into sanctifying grace, to be led by the Holy Spirit into a life more like Christ each and every day. God’s sanctifying grace moves us from belief to action, to practical living by faith in response to God’s ongoing grace.

As part of sanctifying grace, as we ponder what impact grace has in our lives, this week and next week we will consider God’s convincing grace and God’s reconciling grace in our lives.

When we begin a journey of faith in Jesus, convincing grace turns us away from sin and reconciling grace turns us toward a deeper relationship with God.

As John Wesley once wrote:

..Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone.

-taken from www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-85-On-Working-Out-Our-Own-Salvation, Todd and Jennifer Pick “Repenting” 3-24-19 umcdiscipleship.org

So another name for convincing grace is repentance. Repentance is when we change the course or direction of our lives. Repentance is a change of heart, mind, and will.

Repentance begins with an awareness of our own selves that convinces us of God’s love for us

as well as the sin that separates us from God. As the Apostle Paul said, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3.23).

Yet here in contemporary western culture, we do not like to think of our sin. We do not want to acknowledge our need for repentance. If we believe sin does not exist, then it cannot be a problem. If we believe that each and every one of us are mainly trying to be good people who then sometimes make mistakes, there is no need for us to change the course of our lives.

Pastor Steve Manskar once experienced such denial of sin and the need for repentance in the church. He shared,

..Some years ago I was part of an adult Sunday School class in a typical United Methodist Congregation. During the course of conversation about the Scripture lesson for the day I made what I thought was a simple statement of truth: “We are all sinners.” I did not expect the class’ angry response. Everyone took personal offense. It did not help when I responded to the angry gazes directed at me by saying, “I’m including myself when I say that we are all sinners. No one is immune from the human condition that alienates us all from God.”

Every person in the room agreed the doctrine of original sin was mistaken. They agreed that labeling people as “sinners” demeans them and damages their self-esteem. The consensus of the class was that sin is not really that big of a problem. They believed that sin was nothing more than bad habits that can be changed through a little will power.

When I challenged their thinking by asking, “If sin is not really a problem then why did Jesus suffer the humiliation of death on a cross?” the room was silent.

-Steve Manskar “Repent and Believe the gospel.” 2-22-12 blog.umcdiscipleship.org

Convincing grace is God lovingly bringing an awareness of our sin, convicting us that such sin is wrong in such a way that we repent of our sin, making course corrections in our lives away from sin and toward God’s reconciling grace.

For when we turn away from something, we will turn toward something else. God invites us to turn away from our selfish and sinful ways, then turn toward God’s ways of love, hope, compassion, and joy. God invites us to turn away from fear and turn toward hope, turn away from unworthiness and turn toward acceptance from God, turn away from thinking we can save ourselves and turn toward thanksgiving that Jesus is our Savior.

The grace of repentance convinces us that we have a savior who is bigger than our sins, convinces us that we have a God who invites us to new life not only in heaven, but also here and now, and convinces us that we are not alone on the journey of faith, but the Holy Spirit is ready and willing to lead us and guide us along the way.

This grace is good news! And this good news is for all people.

Everyone who thirsts, everyone who is hungry for more, everyone who yearns to receive God’s love in their lives, even everyone who turns away from God at one time or another. All are invited, to repent and believe. All are invited, to respond to God’s love with our love.

The prophet Isaiah’s words to us today are an invitation to receive this good news in our lives,

to turn to God, and live.

Come, Isaiah begins. Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters, come buy and eat,

come, buy wine and milk, come to God. Isaiah here is once again offering the invitation

to accept God’s prevenient grace. To come and receive the free gift of God’s love. To let down our guard enough to begin to consider who God is in our lives. Isaiah goes on to say not only come, but also seek. Seek the Lord, who offers you pardon. Seek the Lord who offers you forgiveness. Come and seek.

Buy, Isaiah continues. Buy without money or price. Here Isaiah is offering the invitation to accept God’s justifying grace. For us this means believing in Jesus as God’s Son our Savior and Lord. For us this means saying yes to a journey as a disciple of Jesus. To buy is to believe, to buy in, to embrace what is being offered. We do not have to pay or earn our salvation; Jesus already paid the price for us. But we do need to invest in what we believe through our response to such grace.

Eat, Isaiah proclaims. The Psalmist proclaims, “taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8)

Here Isaiah is offering the invitation to live into God’s sanctifying grace, to live by faith in response to God’s love, to receive what we have bought.

This grace that we are called to receive is not simply an assurance of heaven. Rather, it includes an invitation to abundant life here and now.

God is more than just bread and water, although we need the basics to survive. God also offers a bountiful feast of his presence and his ways.

If your family has a feast for Thanksgiving, picture the table laden with food. If you’ve ever been to a church potluck with more than enough food for everyone, picture that celebration around the table. One of the previous churches I served had many farm families as members. When they held a potluck, the dessert table was as big as the sides table. For they brought enough food for two families. And they had grown up with the understanding you not only brought a side to feed your family and then some, you also brought a dessert.

That is the bounty that awaits us at God’s table, God’s feast, the abundance of God’s love for us, the depth of the forgiveness of our sins. This is the bounty we celebrate every time we gather to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Isaiah today invites us not only to welcome God’s grace into our lives, but to then respond to such grace through participating in God’s mission in this world. We share the feast with others.

We share how we have been loved and forgiven and set free for new life in this world, with the assurance of eternity. We share how God has helped us turn away from sin and turn toward God’s ways of hope and joy and grace. We share that forgiveness can be for all people, no matter what we have done or left undone.

Convincing grace is not a one and done event in our lives. Convincing grace is the ongoing work of repentance. So don’t get discouraged!

..For as we grow closer to Christ, we recognize more of our faults and limitations, how tight sin has its grip on us, and how much more we need the grace of God to become what God would have us to be. Rather than a sign of weakness or that our life is not going well, responding to God through repentance is a mark of growth and a willingness to more fully rely on God’s grace.

-- umcdiscipleship.org 12-9-18

..In Johnstown, Pa., a tool-supply company received in the mail a $45 check to pay for a stolen hammer. The hammer was stolen more than 20 years ago. According to news reports, the check was accompanied by a letter that said, “Enclosed is $45 to cover the hammer plus a little extra for interest. I’m sorry I stole it, but have changed my ways.” The company donated the money to the Salvation Army.

This can teach us two lessons. First, it can teach us how debilitating unforgiven sin is. It can haunt us for years. This story also can teach us that it is never too late to repent, change your life and receive forgiveness.

-J. Michael Shannon preaching.com repentance illustration

Isaiah invites us to come, buy, eat and believe. But the choice is ours.

Are we willing to say yes to God’s invitation, to receive such abundant grace?

To take the next step of faith toward Jesus and away from our selfish desires?

To be open to a lifetime of God’s convincing grace?

God’s ways are not our ways. God claims and forgives and welcomes all of us. God nurtures us and guides us on the journey we call faith.

God does not allow exile and sin and punishment to have the last word. Instead, God offers hope and forgiveness and home as the last word. Instead, God offers us the depth of God’s grace.

May we put our trust in God’s abundant grace as we continue on this journey of faith, this journey of Lent, this journey of grace.

May it be so. Let us pray.