

Whose abundance is it anyways?

November 24, 2019

Menno Mennonite Church

Purpose: To celebrate the gifts of God's abundance.

Message: As we appreciate the good things in our lives, we do well to recall the author of the abundance is always God's gift in love to everyone.

Scripture: Isaiah 55 whole chapter; I will read; Please read Luke 12: 22-31

Synopsis: We have much to celebrate. We all know this as a season of taking stock and appreciating what we have. And by any measure, we have received abundantly well beyond what we need. And that is good. But it can be easy to forget where this same abundance is from, and, ultimately what our abundance is for.

Isaiah's words are words of assurance to a people long stripped of land and identity, promising that their days of reconciliation will, at last come. It can be easy to forget that what estranged them from the way of God in the first place is by claiming the full responsibility for the well being of the nation as their own, equating their success (often by any means necessary) with the favor of God. But like so many of the prophets do Isaiah reminds Israel the God's provision is a function of God's love and is meant to incarnate the kingdom of God in the forms of justice and sharing with those who have not. We can forget that it is God who give abundantly and need to hold this essential truth as foundational to our view of God and our understanding of the world.

“Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.

2 Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.

3 Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David.

4 See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,
a ruler and commander of the peoples.

5 Surely you will summon nations you know not,
and nations you do not know will come running to you,

because of the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
YHWH has endowed you with splendor.”

6 Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.

7 Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

8 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.

9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10 As the rain and the snow
 come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
 without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
 so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
 It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
 and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

12 You will go out in joy
 and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
 will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
 will clap their hands.

13 Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
 and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.

This will be for the Lord's renown,
 for an everlasting sign,
 that will endure forever."

You probably missed it, but about a month ago there was election in Canada. It was at the end of a 35 day election period (which some in Canada still say was way too long—if only we could be half as succinct. It is a treat of watching a very different process at work. Despite being here, I still keep up with the Canadian news as a matter of curiosity. This was my second election to watch so I knew a bit more of the backstory and mechanism at work. One of the greatest insults to be had is to be accused of “American style attack ads”, half the debates are translated from French, you can actually vote for a candidate running under the banner of the Rhinoceros Party. But some things are so essentially the same that it is uncanny. Like every speech citing Canada as the greatest country in the world, which I find funny not because of the statement itself, but more because of the reassuring familiarity of political speech all around the world. It is obligatory to get elected to any office—“And God bless “ fill in the name of the country here. The other thing that is the insatiable need for politicians to take responsibility for that which they do not, and cannot control like the price of gas, promising that a vote for their party guarantees that all will be right in the world, and prosperity will surely follow the policies that they lay out. The test of the true politician is of course whether they can stop themselves from stating out loud what we all know to be true in our hearts: that this promise always ends with the words “I hope”, no matter who is making it.

We have made it to thanksgiving. And when you get past all the complicated history of the holiday, how it came to be and what it celebrates, we are left with one thing: it is a day where we celebrate prosperity, at least to whatever degree we may. We give thanks for what we have been given. We give thanks for the provision granted us in another year. We give thanks for what has been and anticipate what will be by lavishing ourselves with some turkey. That is good and great. We have a great deal to be thankful for, regardless of our particular circumstances. And it is right and good that we do so. It is from YHWH that all that we have comes, and it is to God that we owe all thanks and gratitude. Which is great and all, but truth be told doesn't make for a terribly innovative sermon. Because what more is there to say about giving thanks, outside of, you know, do it, and it is a good thing to do? If you have it, give thanks for it—we have heard it before, we know it well, and we practice it every day as we give thanks for our dinner. So what's the big deal in giving thanks?

Our text from Isaiah doesn't even mention the word thanks at all. But these are our words indeed. "Come, anyone who is thirsty—come eat, drink deeply of that food that is without cost." "As far as the heavens are from the earth, so far separated are my thoughts from your thoughts" says YHWH God. In many ways, these are our words, painting with clarity the promises of hope for what the Kingdom of God looks like. These are words of Handel's Messiah in these chapters declaring the way of God's kingdom, words that ring in this space as we together anticipate every valley exalted and the rough places made plain. Growing up in a church who has sung this work together for more than 85 years straight, it is about this time where the melodies start flooding back, looked for or now. If you look in your Messiah scores and analyze the texts that are sung, you will see time and again citations of the last half of Isaiah as the source for the text. This is where Isaiah, having plainly and repeated told the people of the disaster that was sure to come to them declares with equal vigor the hope of a world forever changed, a vision that we hold yet today. So different is the second half of Isaiah from the first with its declarations of doom and judgement, scholars have suggested that it might actually be two separate writers recording the word of the Lord.

These are welcome words to a people weary of captivity, held in bondage away from their homeland, mainly because they are at such contrast with the world as they knew it. Indeed, they hold a revolutionary sound to us today. Since when is dinner promised to those who cannot pay? How can a disposed, enslaved people become a light to the nations? This simply is not how the world works. It is not the world as we know it. We take our responsibilities to provide and protect very seriously. As responsible reasonable people, we make plans, put together investments, and all the rest to make sure that when the time comes, enough will be there. But here is God's kingdom promising something that seems utterly impossible, or at least impractical. Were this a politician saying all of this we would laugh them off the stage. Jesus takes up a similar theme in Luke, the text that was read for us this morning. "Don't worry about what there is to eat, how you will dress, or what shall come to you because God takes of the sparrows?" Not the easiest notions at all times. We all have our worries, those things that are well beyond our control. It comes with little surprise that all of this—free food and not worrying- is a bit of disconnect from the world as we know it. A nice dream, but not much else.

Living in the Arizona desert for 9 years has changed the way I read the bible. Jesus talks about how the wild flowers are crowned with glory that outshines the best of Solomon's glory. For years, this was a throw away comment to me because growing up here in the Midwest, one assumes that growing grass is something any fool can do. The trick, really, is NOT to grow something green and flowery where you don't want it than it is to actually do so on purpose. But in Arizona, as here, it is a very different story, just like Palestine. You really have to try to get things to grow. It takes time. It takes patience. It takes great amounts of work. Sometimes it takes a jack hammer just to break through the soil more than an inch or two once you hit the caliche. Yet, every spring, the desert would come alive, with poppies coming from every conceivable crack and crevice, blooming for all that they are worth. This happens all within about 3 weeks, after which the summer gets going and see the flower fade, wither, and die in the heat of the summer. It is a remarkable display, only to have the whole thing wash away before your very eyes. It somewhat defies imagination to see—where there is nothing, all the sudden there is life, growth and wonder.

With this desert scene in mind, it is easy for me to imagine Jesus making his comments on a dusty Galilean road way with the flowers withering all around. This is an environment he knows and walks well. He knows the beauty of spring and the scorching fires of summer that are about to come, and it is this process of growth and hope that he calls to mind as an image of God's loving provision. For me, this casts things in a very different light than what we might be used to think. If God has created the world, and the short lived grasses of the field in such a way as this perhaps there is more that we can expect from God's hand as well.

Maybe that is the point of giving thanks. Giving thanks to God for whatever measure of prosperity we might enjoy is one of the most counter cultural things that we can do. Because it places the responsibility for our well-being where it rightly resides—in the hands of God who gives lavishly, even beyond our expectations. It resists the temptation toward over responsibility that comes so easily to us and recognizes that our world is not entirely one of our own choosing or our own creation, but of God's of good gift of creation to all people and all of the world. Our thanks givings are less a recitation of everything that God has done as if God needed a pat on the back from us for doing it, but rather the more radical act of giving credit where credit is actually

due, and trusting that identification with who supplies all we need with where what we need tomorrow will come from. Our thanksgiving unplugs us from the fear that what we have now will somehow fail for us and asks us to recollect all that God has done in expectation of all that God is yet to do. It is a rehearsal of our relying on God and not on ourselves. It is part of our practice at transforming ourselves from the economics of empire and fear which would tell us that there can never be enough, to the promises of the kingdom where all who would come to the table will be met with good things, beyond the price and privileges of our world. This is made good because of who and what YHWH God is—the creator God whose thoughts and our thoughts are not even on the same plain. God gives generously because God is generous.

Crediting God with our prosperity is right and proper. Yet it is far too easy to equate our prosperity, indeed our riches relative to the rest of the world as an expression of God's favor for us over and against other people. The logic goes something like this: we are doing well, and God is responsible for all gifts, therefore our good fortune is merely a divine endorsement of favor for us and only us. This simply is not the case; at least not as blithely as we would get there. Yes, God gives good gifts, and God gives all things in love. But everything—everything—everything that God gives has one final and ultimate purpose: the provision of all that is needed for ALL of God's people. It is too easy to forget that God gives so the kingdom can be demonstrated on Earth as it is in Heaven, as we so often pray, not to underwrite the lifestyle of the few at the expense of the many. God gives so we can be led to be more like Christ, more like the one in whose image we are called to be. To be sure, these are nothing new here; this is a consistently human inclination. Throughout the Bible, you see time and again the people of God forgetting this simple truth. The Israelites forgot that Manna came from God in the desert and hoarded it to themselves. The Kings of Israel forgot that theirs was a power borne of Godly power, and failed time and again. The people of Isaiah's day fell victim to forgetting this as they were taken into exile. The early church falls into the temptations of class and power as Paul speaks to almost every congregation we have letters to, calling them to the radical grace of the kingdom to give up worldly power for the Godly power of the kingdom.

In our thanksgiving, we must remember that we are given to so we in turn might give, each in our own way, to extend the kingdom, and to share God's love beyond ourselves and our

own. That is the challenge of living beyond our own inclinations and toward God's kingdom. It is just as ordinary and commonplace as that. Often, we associate God's provision as the big things—the miraculous happenings well beyond hope and expectation that are unmistakably God moments—that we can mistake the more mundane provisions as something other than the very miracles they are. Yet we are told time and again that God's gifts are as big as the salvation of many and as small as the oatmeal we enjoy every morning. In all of this God exists. Through all of this God moves. And in the midst of the ordinary remains the remarkable working of our loving God.

We give thanks because God is good. We give thanks because we have been blessed. We give thanks because we know that it is God who supplies our needs. As we go about all of our thanks giving, may we be given in some small part the sight to see, however far off, the promise of the day when the vision of God's kingdom from so long ago comes into full and glorious view. Amen.