

“THE FRUIT OF ONE’S LABOR”

Isaiah 55:1-2; 65:17-25

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

We used to grow vegetables in our garden, and I have to admit that at times I found it quite frustrating. At first we blamed the walnut trees that ran along the side of the yard, so we built some raised beds and brought in fresh soil, but still the tomato plants never produced the kind of harvest we’d hoped for. They were a bit of a tease, looking great for a while, growing, producing lots of buds, but in the end we’d lose some to end rot or some other disease. Eventually, we just planted cherry tomatoes which seemed to do well.

We did enjoy other vegetables: beans, peas, peppers, squash, cucumbers. Janet usually had a couple eggplants going, a few strawberry plants. But most summers, we were away when something was ready to harvest or our busy schedule didn’t allow us to keep up with a consistent watering schedule, or feeding the plants, and it seemed that so many were afflicted with failure to thrive syndrome.

So the last few years, it’s just been a cutting flower garden, which works out great for me, since it’s become Janet’s project. While working on this sermon, I got to sit in the living room admiring an arrangement of lisianthus and gladiolus. It’s not just that it’s beautiful, but also I know the joy that it brings Janet.

As many of you have heard us comment before, the rest of the yard is another story. We could spend all our free time, mowing, weeding, pruning, planting, and trimming and still not get to all that needs to be done. And then there is the reality that we just don’t have as much labor in us as we used to. So we’re having to be smarter about our work. I’ve stopped mowing a large part of lawn, which has created a nice wildlife habitat. Daily we enjoy a doe with her two fawns, a variety of birds, a ground hog, rabbits, and squirrels.

I’m becoming quite a fan of this “less work, more enjoyment” idea. I love the invitation in Isaiah to “come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” Who doesn’t like free things? Especially nice things, which you couldn’t have otherwise?

First, a little background. Scholars divide the book of Isaiah into three prophetic periods, known respectively as First Isaiah from the seventh century BCE during the time of the Assyrian empire covering chapters 1-39; Second Isaiah from 587 to about 537 BCE during the time of the Babylonian captivity covering chapters 40-55; and Third Isaiah from 537 to as late as 450 BCE during the time of Israel’s return to Jerusalem covering chapters 56-66. Second Isaiah’s invitation likely comes near the end around 537. The “exiles” have been away from Jerusalem for nearly fifty years which means that most of them were actually born in Babylon. Their practice of faith has centered around the synagogue, not the temple. Many have adapted and built a comfortable life for themselves. They were, after all, brought to Babylon because they had skills that were useful for building the infrastructure of cities and villages.

But some were poor and these were the ones that Second Isaiah spoke to when he invited the “thirsty” and “those without money” to come. God is about to do a new thing, to create a new opportunity, and it is for those whose labor has not born fruit, whose business has not prospered. To those who stay behind, the prophet asks a question: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?”

Jesus expands on this thought in his parable of the Great Banquet that Janet talked about a few weeks ago. The first who were invited refused the invitation because they were engaged, or one might say distracted, by their own lives, by their own achievements.

So some stayed behind in Babylon, satisfied with the life they had built for themselves, missing out on “good things to eat” and the “rich food” on offer, opting out of the banquet. It raises the questions for me: “What are we eating these days? Are we spending our lives on things that do not satisfy?” We are not, for the most part, among the poor. We are not looking for a fresh start, a new beginning. What are we missing that no amount of effort on our part can achieve?

What’s on offer in Isaiah is not just a return to a homeland that many of them had never known, but a restored relationship to God that Israel had turned away from. Let’s think about what this looks like for us. We are shaped by a culture that believes hard work brings rewards, that poverty results from a lack of industry. What’s missing in this equation is the disparity in opportunities. What’s missing is that each of us is born into a network of relationships which offer advantages to some and obstacles to others. What we easily forget are the gifts upon which our lives flourish. Some things only come free, cannot be bought, earned, or achieved. We love “because God first loved us.” “By grace, you are saved through faith, not by works... it is the gift of God.” God feeds us good things and charges nothing.

But it doesn’t end there. Many years later, Third Isaiah offers a vision that reflects the nature of things in God’s world. Those who receive the gift of God will become a delight: no more weeping, no more distress, no more death out of season, no more labor in vain; only blessing, only a responsive God, only harmony; no harm, no destruction. This is not a vision for the afterlife, but an aspiration for the faith community, based on the free gift of God joined to the purposeful labor of God’s people. God delivers and equips. God feeds and shelters and invites the faith community into the ministry of feeding and sheltering. Offering both a gift and a partnership.

I haven’t yet figured out the yard. I look at the floral arrangements and the fawns frolicking and I understand the gift that it has been. It does nurture a certain gratitude in my spirit, an essential feature of a living faith. But I don’t have a vision for what it could be. The work feels more burdensome than productive. I don’t yet know what to do with this, but it seems like an apt metaphor for my faith journey: gratitude for the free gifts of God that I experience in the faith community and yet a sense of burden for the work we engage in together. Feeding the hungry, sheltering the unhoused, restoring the earth, making peace, enacting justice, living into that vision of God’s world where sorrow, harm and

destruction are a thing of the past. As in the garden, some days it feels like I'm weeding the same patch of ground over again.

That's why I need the vision on top of the invitation. I can do gratitude. I like gifts. But work is hard and I'm not always sure it's getting me anywhere. But the vision tells me it's important. It tells me that God will bless my labor. And it encourages me to enjoy the fruit of my labor, to remember those days when the bed is weeded and my spirit says "amen" to the work of my hands and the beauty I see before me. We've seen many days like that here: when we celebrate those who answer the call to serve as deacons and elders and thank those who have finished their terms; when the music of choir, musicians and congregation cause our spirits to soar in praise, when the unhoused find shelter in our building, when we gather to study scripture and hear a new insight that helps us understand God or God's call a little better, when we see the stranger with eyes of love, when we celebrate and honor the work of a peacemaker, when we explore dimensions of justice and deepen spirituality.

So much to think about: the many gifts of God to this faith community and the work of love that we've been given to do. Gratitude and vision. Food for thought. Amen.