

Call to Worship

We come to worship a God of abundance, who gives freely the gift of grace to all.

Lord, we come before you today, with petitions not only for ourselves, but for the world.

May God's presence excite our hearts so we may seize these moments in service through Christ.

May we know God's word living in our midst.

Prayer of Invocation

Gracious God, we gather as your church acknowledging the desires in our hearts, and bringing the needs of our lives. But much as we depend on your guidance and strength, our sincere intent is to be faithful and to learn to be what you want, rather than get what we want. As we continue in this Lenten season of soul-searching, draw us into harmony with your will and way for us as individuals and as a community. Amen.

The Word Isaiah 55:1-9 Common English Bible

Invitation to the feast: All of you who are thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat! Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!

Why spend money for what isn't food, and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts.

Listen and come to me; listen, and you will live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful loyalty to David. Look, I made him a witness to the peoples, a prince and commander of peoples.

Look, you will call a nation you don't know, a nation you don't know will run to you because of the LORD your God, the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you.

Seek the LORD when he can still be found; call him while he is yet near. Let the wicked abandon their ways and the sinful their schemes. Let them return to the LORD so that he may have mercy on them, to our God, because he is generous with forgiveness.

My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.

Living the Word

In today's world, people seek fulfillment and contentment. We like the feeling of being satisfied and happy. On Sunday morning those who arrive here, are seeking God to fill a void that may be widening throughout the week.

Often during the week we busily run around doing whatever it takes to buy what we need and to produce what is demanded of us. As we scurry, we try to satisfy not only ourselves, but those we work for and those we care for. Through it all, we just desire to be happy and make others happy. Yet Sunday comes and we find ourselves worn and weary and still hungering and thirsting for more.

In his essay "The Religion of the Market," David Loy maintains that the traditional religions of the world need not fear that new [nonmainstream religious groups], cults or sciences will displace them. The new danger, he insists, is [a crushing force that is relentlessly destructive, crushing and insensitive]; a driven machine that insists that we demand and are provided more and more, with no thought to the notion "Enough!"

We live in the midst of constant promotion. Everywhere we turn we are bombarded with offers and enticements to fill every imaginable want and desire. Even if we do not need anything, it is easy to be convinced that we really want something. You know what I am talking about – those 'last grab' items as you wait in line to check out. If the Chocolate doesn't convince you, how about a gift card to dine out or just one more package of batteries in case you run out and on and on...well, you know.

I wonder about the market of Isaiah's day. No billboards, no commercials, no ads every time you looked at your grocery list. But a hustle bustle activity center with people rushing to barter and buy, others anxious to sell what they could...and then those on the fringe, with nothing to sell and nothing to buy anything with; those who were begging for simply their daily bread.

Isaiah receives God's word, maybe after visiting the market. Like Isaiah we are only human and we have needs for daily feeding of our bellies and our souls. Jesus even taught us to ask God for our daily bread in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." Why do we have to ask? Why didn't God create us so we didn't need so much? Why didn't God leave our desires out of us? Could it be that God wants us to depend on God?

Our eating habits may be changing. I remember a time when the goal was to save enough money and not eat all day to go hungry to the buffet. Then after bragging that we were on our third plate of food, we would eat until it hurt. By the way, did you know it takes the stomach 20 minutes to realize how full it is from the latest bite you have taken. So if you wait until it begins to hurt, it is going to get much more uncomfortable before the last bite arrives down there.

Most of us have been there and may be learning that it is better to have quality verses quantity. God has the ultimate refills for us: finest bread, sweetest honey, purest water and the best drink from the vine; the richest provisions to be obtained anywhere on earth. Yet we run right past God, looking for something which our Creator has already supplied for us free of cost. Acts 17: 28 reminds us "In God we live, move and exist." God calls us into covenant to be happy and completely contented by God.

In comparison to what is offered to us freely, Isaiah says we are paying for things that we don't need in the first place, spending money on what is not bread and laboring without satisfaction. Isaiah says we need a new diet of good and rich food.

The Almighty doesn't want us to be frustrated and struggling through this life, but to be able to live in joyfulness. Our constant attempt to satisfy ourselves is doomed to fail. Too often, like spoiled children we become obsessed with our toys and forget the Giver. To say nothing of how well we don't share our toys with others. Even so, God is near, still loving us and is ready and desiring to bless us.

God has abundance ready for each of us, and deserves our praise, so I invite you now to listen as I read Psalm 63:1-8.

God! My God! It's you— I search for you! My whole being thirsts for you!

My body desires you in a dry and tired land, no water anywhere.

² Yes, I've seen you in the sanctuary; I've seen your power and glory.

³ My lips praise you because your faithful love is better than life itself!

⁴ So I will bless you as long as I'm alive; I will lift up my hands in your name.

⁵ I'm fully satisfied— as with a rich dinner. My mouth speaks praise with joy on my lips—

⁶ whenever I ponder you on my bed, whenever I meditate on you in the middle of the night—

⁷ because you've been a help to me and I shout for joy in the protection of your wings.

⁸ My whole being clings to you; your strong hand upholds me.

We search for God, we yearn for Christ to fill us. Then when our cup overflows with blessings, we sit back and pat our bellies, contented, or continue to keep all of the blessings for ourselves until we hurt. It is much easier to share, when we understand that our fulfillment comes through the sharing. If we are willing to give as well as receive, our capacity to be filled doesn't stretch us to a bursting point. Sort of like the chocolate fountains that continue to overflow to a next layer down until all are full and then it cycles around again.

Last year when Bishop Jung appointed me to Hayward, he told me that when he visited here after his arrival in Wisconsin, he heard your joys and celebrations. His word to me with the appointment to Hayward was that

God had great things planned for us here. The Bishop also encouraged me to consider how we could reach out to those in the community that have moved in and haven't found a church home.

I knew that he had challenged the whole Conference to help him establish 100 new churches. So I assumed he was encouraging all of the pastors in the same way. Several weeks ago, the United Methodist Clergy from our region spent the day with the Bishop. His question to me was "How are things in Hayward?" "I told him good, very good." His response was "I am glad."

During the day I spent time hearing stories from others about combining shrinking churches; so what was once single pastorates like Hayward, are now combinations of four churches with one and a half pastors. Not too far south of us are the Exeland and Birchwood Churches, the first two that I served – ½ time, which are now yoked with Bruce and Weyerhaeuser Churches, still with only a ½ time pastor. To the south west are the Grantsburg and Atlas churches that I served as a full time appointment. They are now yoked with St Croix Falls and Wolf Creek two full time pastorates, now 1 ½.

Several years ago the Bishop told the clergy of the need to reach out or we would not have enough people to sustain our Conference. He then said our Conference currently had 476 churches, 100 churches of which would be considered to be in 'hospice care'. These are not scare tactics, but a new reality. Don't be alarmed, we are 'safely' sitting on a pile of abundance here in Hayward, we are pretty healthy as mainline churches go these days.

Then I began to hear a small voice saying to me "What are you afraid of?" I have blessed you and the Hayward church with a new understanding of what it can mean to think greater and you are receiving abundantly. Between my mind wanderings, I heard the Bishop say we need a God centered economy, filled with God's generosity and abundance. Not a 'we deserve' but a 'how can we go out to others' attitude. He said we need to be people who are more than just 'comers' to church, but also 'bringers' to church.

In my mind I argued "But Lord, things are good at Hayward United Methodist Church. We are content with what we have before us. We have people coming in to worship without us having to be bringers." That sounded very selfish and all about 'me.' I tried justifying it by telling myself I was really trying to protect all of you. Sometimes it takes us a long time to surrender ourselves to God, to come home to where God's heart really is.

After all it is not as if God asked me to raise three million dollars for a unique building with a colorful spire and they would come... No that happened 30 years ago and we had to dream big and believe in our abundance then. It is not as if God asked me to go out door to door and invite people to a new church...but I have done that over the years as well. Actually, I have no idea what God has in mind for me or for this church. I do know we have to get off our pile of contentment and abundance before we burst.

Remember 'Think Greater?' That doesn't mean we have to do more, but we may have to be more. God is calling me, us to just think outside the box we are comfortable in. This box; to think beyond where our minds have gone so far. What will happen, I haven't much of a clue, except to say that I know we won't go it alone and whatever it is, God has to lead us.

My prayers changed as I drove north to Hayward. They now sound more like "I don't understand, but I will follow where you lead me." The next morning I began work on this sermon by reading once again Isaiah 55:1-9. I think there are times in the scripture when we hear, read and digest only what we want and what makes sense for that moment. As I was working on this to prepare it for today, when I read the same verses that I had read a number of times earlier, verse 5, 8 & 9 had new meaning.

Verse 5 says: "Look, *you will call a nation you don't know, a nation you don't know will run to you because of the LORD your God, the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you.*" Did you hear that the first time we read it?

It is for me, but it is also for you, it is for us. *"Look, you will call a nation you don't know, a nation you don't know will run to you because of the LORD your God, the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you."*

Then verse 8 & 9: *"My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans."* I looked to make sure I was on the same page that I had put in the bulletin several days before. This was the same scripture.

I went to visit a woman recovering from cancer surgery, and she shared a short story with me. I can't remember the exact words, but here is the punch line: God says: Don't worry about yesterday, I am not the great 'I was', nor worry about tomorrow as I am not the great 'I will be'; Let's just deal with today, because I am the Great 'I am.'

So who might they be? What nation will run to us? Who are you? I belittle you when I try to protect you from God. When the Outreach team discussed trying an October Fest Dinner, many of you jumped on board and there was a new excitement in the air around here. When they also went on faith by asking a donation for the meal instead of a set price and considered inviting the Community to a meal into our space, once again there was eager support.

My job isn't to hinder ministry here, not to hold us back, but to help us think greater and then look wisely at the options of what we can do together, whatever that may be. How much greater will God think? I assure you it isn't about the quantity of how much more we can do, but are we able to accept the quality of what we are offered, share with whomever God has for us to reach.

The Prodigal Son traveled home with low expectations and his father made sure he was well fed. Like him we will go to the buffet line - for that is really about learning when we have had enough and then sharing so that others can be well fed, too. The quality of God is never diminished. The quantity of God won't run out, but it is not to be hoarded just by us. We should know by now that there is more love in God than there is capacity in us to receive it.

When we are well fed, then what? It is Lenten season and we are asked to put away our indulging practices to take time to notice where and by how much we are missing the target God has set before us. Our real need is to come home to be well fed, by God. We are about to share a feast, Christ in our midst. And then what? God only knows...But I invite you to pray with me about the future and what it might be.