



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 28, 2013

"Why Do You Spend Money on Junk Food?" - Isaiah 55:1-13

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Isaiah 55! That number 55 is a big number—big here this morning, and big personally (more about that later!). But the big question before us today, the question God asks of us in this 55th chapter of Isaiah, is a huge one.

In past weeks we've considered God's questions to us and they're all big. The first was, "Where are you?" and we examined our relationship with God just like Adam found he had to do. Then the question, "Where's your brother?" and like Cain discovered, we ARE our brother's keeper. "What's your name?" was the next question and with Jacob we realized our great need to be blessed by God.

Then last week the question, "What's that in your hand?" Pastor Tim encouraged us not to wait until we have tons of faith to take action, but to act in obedience to God now. And only then will faith come and only then will we see how it all works together—how God uses the good, the bad, and the ugly of our lives to accomplish His perfect plan, like he did with Moses.

The question today is similar to last week, but it goes deeper and reaches farther. It's more penetrating and it's broadcasted far and wide. Every other question we've covered is directed to an individual person: to Adam, to Cain, to Jacob, and to Moses. This one goes directly to the heart of anyone who has ears to hear. Here it is:

Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your

labor for that which does not satisfy?
(Isaiah 55:2a NRSV)

The sermon topic is simply The Message translation of that verse 2:
"Why Do You Spend Your Money on Junk Food?"

The living letters translation puts it a step further into street language:
"Why pay for groceries that don't do you any good?"

Isaiah is putting in poetic and metaphor form, a huge spiritual question that goes deep into the soul simply because it begs the next question that can take many forms:

What does satisfy?
What's the purpose of my life?
Why am I here?
Where am I headed?
How can I be fulfilled?
What's the meaning of it all?

I think one of the compelling reasons behind the quest of science to find intelligent life on other planets is that maybe those beings could shed light on why are they are there...and that might tell us why we are here.

These questions always bring me back to an early summer morning in Atlanta sitting with my brother eating breakfast on his lanai.

Most of you are no doubt familiar with the film "Rudy". I've always felt my brother out-rudied Rudy. Football was my brother's life from a very small child on. He was never real big but he worked hard to make the team—in elementary

school, in junior high school, in high school, in college, in the NFL. His body was not fueled by muscle...it was fueled by desire. He would run from one town to another before the word marathon was hardly known—just to get in shape.

He was a lineman, and too small for any school to pick him up, so he became a walk-on at a major college. He not only earned a scholarship, played in several bowls and eventually the NFL, but he became the head football coach of the college he entered as a walk-on.

He was my mentor. I looked up to him in a big way—still do. So you can imagine my being stunned by his response to my simple statement that morning. As we sat together eating eggs he had scrambled, overlooking the giant pool in the midst of a palatial home he had just bought, I said, "Bill, you've finally made it. Your dream came true. You're at the top."

He said, "Sim, you're right! This was my goal. I have made it to the top, and I want to tell you there is nothing here. Nothing!"

"Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

Okay then, "What *does* satisfy?"

Isaiah 55. Fifty-five is a special number. I knew weeks ago this was the chapter assigned to me, so one morning early I took my first hard look at chapter 55.

It was a beautiful morning on the Seine River, just outside Paris. I said the number 55 had a personal meaning. Mimi and I splurged for our 55th wedding anniversary. We took an eight-day cruise on the River Seine.

The Eiffel Tower was exciting and Normandy Beach was emotional (the day we visited was almost the same June day as "D-Day" 69 years before). The famed Monet Gardens were inspirational. But sailing on the river was relaxing... especially early in the morning. The landscape of trees, farm houses, crumbling castles, white cliffs, and rolling fields seemed to glide silently by.

As I dug into Isaiah 55 I found even more beauty there. I love this chapter. I always have, but never really knew why—like a painting that attracts you, but you've never stopped to ask yourself why. I stopped and asked and the passage came alive to me that morning.

I found the whole chapter is a beautiful invitation for a searching soul—a soul looking for meaning. A thirsty soul. (I believe there's someone here today with a thirsty soul. I pray you may find today what you're looking for.)

It's all here in the first verse. The other verses just seem to unpack what's in the first verse. It starts out "Ho", and ho means "Oh, if you could just see how off course you are—alas, if you could just see the big picture that you're barking up the wrong tree, that you're working hard for nothing!"

"Ho, everyone who thirsts come to the waters: And you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

The verse says anyone may come, but it says you have to be thirsty. All you have to do is hear, come, and take. It's very simple, but you have to be thirsty. You have to be hungry. You have to really want this

water, this wine, this milk, this bread.

When I joined the church I wasn't hungry or thirsty. I played with it all like a little kid plays with his food. He doesn't appreciate what he's dealing with. He ends up getting it all over his high chair and all over his face and not one bit gets into his mouth. That was me when I joined the church—all over my face. I said all the right words, but absolutely nothing got inside of me.

I didn't really hear an invitation (though God's Spirit may have given it). That's because I wasn't really hungry or thirsty. Later, I did become very hungry and very thirsty. Then I came and ate and drank and I knew what it was to be satisfied deep in my soul—but you have to be thirsty.

It's expensive stuff this food and drink. And as we'll see, it's the most expensive stuff in the world. But here's the odd thing about it. We're told to *buy* it, although it doesn't cost anything. Twice, we are told in verse one that we have to buy it. So make no mistake, it's not free!

Okay, wait a minute! This is double talk. We are clearly told to buy it. But we are also clearly told, and told twice, that we don't need any money. You know of anything like that where you buy something costly, but don't pay anything for it?

The first year Mimi and I were married we put a lot of miles on the car we drove. We were always on the road. We bought a lot of gas, but without money. We both were in school and we didn't have any money. How did we do it? As a wedding gift my mother gave us—for a whole year—the use of her Shell Oil credit card.

That gas was costly, but not to us. It was not free gas, but it was free to us. All it cost us was our signature. That's the story of the Bible when you look at the big picture.

It's said that the Book of Isaiah is like a miniature Bible. The first 39

chapters are like the first 39 books of the Old Testament, filled with judgment upon immoral and idolatrous people. All society has fallen and the whole earth has sinned. Judgment must come and justice must be done. God cannot allow such blatant sin to go unpunished.

The last 27 chapters of Isaiah are the opposite. They are like the 27 books of the New Testament. They are filled with hope, salvation, forgiveness, redemption, and Good News!

"What happened?" Did God change his mind in the middle? No! In the middle of Isaiah's prophetic book there appears one who is called The Suffering Savior. We recognize Him right away to be Jesus Christ. God sent Him to stand in place of the sinful human race—to stand in our place and to receive the penalty for our sins. Listen to these words from chapter 53:

"He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have all turned to his own way, And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53: 5,6)

So justice has now been done. Jesus took the rap. It was done at an enormous price—so costly we cannot begin to fathom it. It all took place on that cross outside Jerusalem. In I Peter we read, *"[Christ] himself bore our sins in his own body on [that] tree ... by whose stripes we are healed."* (I Peter 2:24)

God arranged for the tab to be on Jesus. We pay. We sign the receipt, but we use his Jesus' credit. It's a high price that we could never afford. It cost God everything. It cost us nothing but a signature.

So chapter 55 in effect says, "The ticket is priceless, but it has been paid in full.

This is your invitation to come and eat and drink and be satisfied."

It may have been that very morning on the river boat—the morning I was taking a hard look at Isaiah 55—that we sat at breakfast with a couple about our age and the conversation got around to God. This was not our intention. We had decided beforehand that we were not on this trip to be missionaries. We were going to be just another couple on vacation.

I told Mimi beforehand to please not ask these people what they do. They will then say, "And what kind of work do you do?" And I'll have to tell them and then we'll spend the whole meal with uncomfortable people.

It didn't work. Usually within five minutes my cover was blown. And then the questions. "Okay, so your church owns a golf course? How did that happen?" Or "So you were schooled to be an engineer. Now you are a pastor. What caused you to change over?"

A younger couple we got to know and really liked—we've even exchanged photos and emails since we've returned—walked right into it. We had just met them and were sitting with them the night of our anniversary. The head chef came out with a flaming cake. The whole dining hall cheered us. This couple wanted to know what anniversary it was and how we had made it together that long.

The answer to every one of those questions has a major Jesus element to it. Mimi and I couldn't hide that fact so we said it like it was. But we did try our best not to speak Christianese—a language that could scare people. We discovered something.

We discovered that almost everyone with whom we became acquainted on that boat had a certain kind of thirst for God. I say *almost* everyone. One night at our table of

eight, it suddenly dawned upon one of the women that I was a pastor. She immediately got up and left the table. She never came back. Her husband, however, became totally intrigued and he reminisced to the rest of us around the table. He said, "You know, way back I joined a Presbyterian church. I loved the music. I still remember it. I miss it. Maybe I should reconnect."

All of this has taken me way back to an unforgettable experience during the early years of my ministry. It illustrates this passage and what I'm trying to say this morning.

Mimi and I lived in a duplex in Ft. Lauderdale near the church where I was the youth pastor. Our two small girls had play friends two doors down. We got to know the parents. I'll call them Bob and Sue. They were exceptional people—talented and competent. Highly educated; attractive in every way. Sue was on furlough from her career while caring for their small children, while Bob was rising fast in a respected Florida firm. Through the children we became friends. They were an outstanding family, but they didn't go to any church or worship anywhere.

Our hearts went out to them because they were admittedly bereft of any spiritual dimension in their lives. It made us sad every time we looked into their eyes. You could almost see the spiritual darkness. It was one of those situations where you feel you have a wonderful gift—spiritually speaking—that you want to give to someone, but you don't know how.

On one hand, you feel if you broach the subject you may lose them as friends forever and never have a chance to say anything. On the other hand, you feel selfish and guilty because you watch them starve while you're sitting on plenty and keeping it a secret.

Ah, the solution presented itself! Billy Graham brought to town his

first theater film, an evangelistic movie called "The Restless Ones". At the end of each showing an invitation was given and people who came forward were counseled by trained volunteers to receive Christ or rededicate their lives just like at a big crusade. Our church participated in the training.

Mimi and I invited Bob and Sue to the theater to see the movie and then to dinner afterwards at a restaurant. It was a perfect situation. We did not expect they would go forward after the film, but we knew they would ask questions at dinner and we could tell them our story about what Christ meant to us.

It didn't work. We saw the film, but at dinner they never mentioned the film. We didn't want to ask them what they thought about the film. That would have seemed too much like a set-up. So the evening came and went with no conversation about God (truth be known it was more cowardice on our part than strategy; they were an intimidating couple.)

We don't think they ever had a clue as to what the movie was about, yet we still sensed as we always had, a deep spiritual hunger. This troubled me.

So the next morning I had my devotions in my usual spot—in the little cramped room off the kitchen where the washing machine and the dryer ran non-stop. It was noisy, but it was like music compared to what usually went on in the other parts of the duplex early in the morning with our two little girls. Our son hadn't been born yet but we were still outgrowing our duplex.

My Bible reading that morning was Psalm 66. The translation I was reading said something like this: "*O God, you are awesome in your deeds. By the greatness of your power will your enemies bow down before you, and they will sing praises to your name.*" (Psalm 66:2-4)

As I thought of how big and great God was, and as I prayed for Bob and Sue, I received an uncanny boldness. I determined I would go to their house first thing that morning and I would tell them exactly what Mimi and I were feeling. Just tell it like it was. I didn't tell Mimi my plan. I was on spiritual steroids that morning. I knew she wasn't.

But I needed a prop for starters. Fortunately, Bob and Sue's children had left a couple of big stuffed toys in our living room. I grabbed them up as I headed out. I walked the short distance to their front door and knocked. Sue answered the door. I simply said I was returning the stuffed animals her children had left at our house. She thanked me and said the children were off to a day school. She said Bob had left early to take them.

As we stood there in the doorway I found myself saying, "Sue, Mimi and I took you and Bob to that movie last night because we want you to know God. We can't tell you how great it is to know God personally, to talk with Him, and have Him guide you."

Sue seemed dazed but she let me finish my spiel. "Please know Mimi and I don't want to lecture you and Bob or coerce you. It's just that we would always feel terrible if we never shared with you about this wonderful thing we've discovered. We think a lot of you two and we don't want you to miss out on something this great."

Sue said very emphatically, "Sim. You need to know, I don't believe the Bible. I don't believe anything about the Bible."

I said, "Sue, do you know the story line of the Bible—the theme of the Bible? Do you know what the Bible says?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," she said.

"We both smiled. She knew

what I was going to say next and she almost said it with me, "How can you say you don't believe the Bible when you don't know what it says?"

"Sue, if you've got a few minutes I'd like to share with you that story."

"Sure," she said. "Come on in."

I explained that she didn't have to believe what I was going to say, but that what I was going to tell her was what every Christian church understood to be the story of the Bible.

I made it clear that in the beginning out of his power and love God created the human race—that everything about us was designed to find its fulfillment in knowing God and that God was very pleased with his design.

But God gave the human race the ability to choose, and somewhere along the line humankind rebelled and chose to split from God. So immediately the human race became separated from a holy loving God and spiraled downward becoming unholy and disoriented like a compass without a reference point.

I told Sue that we are all born in this downward spiral. We were all born apart from the God we were made for, but that as the great scientist Pascal said, "There remains in each of us a God-shaped vacuum."

I told Sue of my own quest to come home to the God I sensed I was made for. I tried religion in any form. It didn't work. A friend and I tried for a whole year to keep the Ten Commandments. We kept them on the outside but failed miserably on the inside. I felt farther from God than ever after that experiment.

While on the outside I no doubt seemed to be a normal person, on the inside I felt unholy, lost, guilty, and apart from God, somehow realizing—and this was scary—that if I did not get back to God in this life I

would go into eternity without Him, without the reference point I was made for. I believe this is the definition of hell.

Sue said, "Well, then what's the way to God? You tried every way and you say nothing works. If there's a way, what is it?"

"There is a way!" I said, "That's why the Bible was written....." Sue suddenly interrupted. "Oh my, look at the time, I've got to pick up the kids. Oh, please come back. Please come back. Can you come back in an hour and a half? The children will be through with lunch and napping. I want to hear what you say is the way to God."

I looked at my watch. I had been there over two and a half hours. I went home, called the church to tell them where I was, what I was doing, and to pray for Sue. Mimi was gone somewhere with our girls.

I returned to Sue's house (oblivious to whatever the neighbor's might think was going on) and I told her of God's problem with it all—that He was a just God, but also a loving God. He longed for us to come home to Him, but a pardon also had to be paid for all our wrongdoing. A just judge cannot ignore a court summons and just tear it up—even a loving, forgiving judge. So God had a problem.

"So what did God do?" Sue asked. I told her what the Bible says, that "all we like sheep have gone astray" and God has laid upon Jesus Christ the sins of us all. That on a cross two thousands years ago God poured out upon Jesus all my sins and hers and Jesus experienced an eternal separation from God because He was an eternal being. He was God in the flesh. In short, Jesus Christ went to hell in our place so we could find a home in God.

Then, just before He died on the cross He said, "It is finished!" By that He meant the pardon had been paid in full.

Salvation is free. This is called grace. It is a gift from God. It cost God everything. It costs us nothing. If we receive this gift God becomes once again the shepherd of our soul. He will never let us go now or forever.

"How do you receive this gift?" she asked. Her face was wet with tears. I told her that Jesus arose from the dead and He was alive and that He was in the room with us. I told her there was a verse in the Bible where Jesus stands at the door of our lives and he says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me."

Sue suddenly jumped up and ran into what appeared to be her bedroom. She closed the door behind her as she went. I could hear waves of sobs coming through the closed door. I waited for what seemed like a long time. Finally, she came back and sat on her couch. I was in a chair. She was now composed but she could not speak. I tried to speak, too, but I couldn't. There was a powerful Presence in the room.

We both sat silently for a time. It wasn't awkward. We both knew what was happening. It was something bigger than both of us. Finally, I was able to say, "Sue, I don't have to ask you if want to open your life to Jesus. I know the answer. But I will ask you to pray this prayer out loud after me that I know you've already prayed in your heart.

And so she did—and I hope you will too right now if you've never prayed this prayer before: "**Lord Jesus Christ. Come into my heart. Cleanse me of my sins. Make me into the person you want me to be. Thank you for coming into my heart. Amen.**"

I never got an opportunity to talk to Bob. They never attended our church. Soon after this they moved away as did we. But years later we

got a Christmas card from Sue. We don't know how she got our address because it was still not the day of the internet. She recalled that day in Ft. Lauderdale and wanted us to know she was an elder in a Presbyterian church in North Carolina.

I love happy endings. Isaiah 55 ends happily like my story. It builds from thirstiness to fulfillment. I don't know where Sue is today, but if she happens to hear this talk or read it somewhere I dedicate these words from Isaiah 55 to her because it is her story. Indeed, it is the story of us all who have tasted and found that the Lord is good.

Why do you spend money for that which is not bread?

Why do you labor for that which does not satisfy?

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;

And you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, Buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Eat what is good. Delight yourself in rich food.

Seek the Lord while he may be found.

Call upon him while he is near; Return to the Lord that he may have mercy

And to our God for he will abundantly pardon.

For as the rain and snow come down from heaven

Making the earth bring forth and sprout so shall my word be,

It shall not return to me empty.

The mountains and the hills

before you shall burst into song,

And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Prayer: Lord, we thank you for the happy day when Jesus washed our sins away—when you became the shepherd of our souls and filled that God-shaped vacuum with yourself. Help that one seeking you today to find what they are looking for. In Jesus' name, Amen.