

**“Learning Forgiveness”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**The Third Sunday in Lent**  
**March 7, 2010**  
**Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-9**  
**Mathew 5:43-48 and 7:1-6**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Great God, you are rich in mercy and forgiveness beyond our knowing. Show us what we need to understand, and help us to learn how to practice forgiveness in all our relationships, so that we might experience the renewal of the life you offer us in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

As most of you are aware, I’m sure, I just returned from a trip to Delaware to be with my parents. It is likely, though, that you don’t know that on my return trip I sat with some people on their way down to the Clearwater area for Spring Training. As I thought about our conversation, I remembered a story I heard in connection with our Old Testament reading for this morning.

The story, and I am sure many of you can relate to it, is about a hot dog vender at baseball games. Because his specialty is hot dogs, he has developed his own special way of making those hot dogs irresistible to the people in the stands.

He walks slowly up and down the aisles shouting in a unique way. For those of you who have been to a baseball game or two, I am sure you can hear that voice in the ears of your mind. For those of you who aren’t faithful attendees of local games, though, you may not quite understand this story. You see, it’s sort of hard to describe.

He yells, “Haaaaaaawt dawgs.”. That’s it. The monotone is what’s unexpected. Vendors peddling their products usually focus on the quality of the product: “Hot dogs, get your hot dogs, hot mustard, hot relish, spicy stadium frankfurters, get your scrumptious, mouth-watering delectable dogs, get ‘em right here.” The best peddlers make a hot dog on a roll sound like a seven-course meal. Unfortunately the hot dog itself isn’t always quite as good as

advertised!

The vendor in Isaiah 55 whose words we read this morning has a product which lives up to its billing. The song begins with a street corner vendor shouting “Ho”, for which we may need a new translation, but which was for them the ancient of “get ‘em right here.” With running water as close as the nearest faucet we don’t need water vendors, but in Palestine, water was precious and expensive, a commodity bought and sold in the street.

But this vendor isn’t *selling* water. God’s giving it away, “Come, everyone who’s thirsty – here’s water! Come you who have no money – buy grain and eat! Come! Buy wine and milk – it costs you nothing! Come! Drink your fill! It’s free!” Those who heard these words were astounded. No grocery store ever used this slogan in their newspaper ad: “And you who have no money, come get wine and milk for free!”

Now I’m sure we have all gotten phone calls which begin, “Hi. We’d like to give you a subscription to *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated*, or *Christianity Today*.”

We respond, “Thank you. I’m not interested.”

“We’d like to give you an all expense paid trip for two to the Bahamas.”

“Thank you. I’m not interested.”

“We’d like to give you a year’s supply of hot dogs for free!”

My favorite reply – and one of which my nephew frequently reminds me is, “It’s still early and you are only on the “B”s. Go on to your next call!”

We all know by now that nothing in this world is free. We may like *Newsweek*; we might really like to go to the Bahamas; and sometimes nothing tastes better than a hotdog. But...we have all learned that, if we want something, we will have to get it ourselves.

That’s what makes it hard for us to accept that our deepest need is one we can’t take care of on our own. This hymn in Isaiah is for people who are hungry and thirsty for joy and hope and who are tired and need rest and forgiveness, who

aren’t satisfied with their lives, who recognize that they need something they can’t create, something to think, something to love, something that is missing.

The Israelites were missing something important. They were a conquered nation in exile. Their enemies destroyed the temple. One commentator writes, “The Hebrew people don’t even know where God’s dining room is – much less whether there’s food on the table.” They were far from home living with strange people with peculiar beliefs. Something was definitely missing.

None of us was want to confess the emptiness we feel, to admit that left to our own devices, our own devices aren’t enough. We do our best to fill our lives. We work for the promotion which promises success. We look for the significant other who will make everything right. We drink from the fountains at which we wait in line and come away with parched throats. We still hunger to be known and understood. We still hunger to be loved and forgiven. We hunger to be at peace in our own skin.

The Israelites had to decide what to do with their deepest longings. They had been in captivity for fifty years, but the Babylonians treated them well. They allowed them to buy property and engage in business. The Israelites had been successful. So King Cyrus told them that they could go home. He knew they wouldn’t. They didn’t want to leave what they had gotten used to. They didn’t miss the home they’d never known. Though the king said they were free to go they were captive to a way of life. They knew it wasn’t who they were meant to be, but it was what they knew. They knew that they weren’t really at home, but they had given up on ever really being at home anywhere.

We keep working for the day when we will feel completely at home, but we recognize that the fulfillment we can create is temporary at best. Some of the people who have the job we think will make us complete, the people who have a family we see as almost perfect, the people who have the life we want...those people are still

empty inside. The Israelites sang, “Why do we spend money for what is not bread, and wages for what does not satisfy? Why do we work for what doesn’t matter?”

Today is the Third Sunday in Lent – the season given to honesty about our longings and God’s peace. As you know, our Lenten Sermon Series is “Learning Forgiveness”. We have seen that self-examination helps us stay grounded in the reality of our own need for God’s continuing mercy and forgiveness. And we have learned that it is only as we become aware of our inner condition that we can express ourselves honestly before God. This week we will be exploring the topic of forgiving our enemies. Not an easy topic, is it?

As you probably know, our two basic reactions to enemies are fight and flight. With external enemies, these patterns are more apparent; we are either engaged in audible, tangible combat, or we are avoiding and hiding from the foe. But with internal enemies, it can be harder to tell if we are fighting or fleeing. We are often unaware of those internal enemies like anger, or jealousy, or pride. We typically resist painful, frightening feelings by denying them or suppressing them.

Often, we carry the same strategy into our relationship with external enemies. Since it seems vaguely unchristian to have bad feelings about anyone, some of us like to imagine that we have no enemies at all. Have you ever said, or heard someone else say, “I don’t have a problem getting along with anyone?” Theology professor Luther Smith’s retort to such generalizations would be, “You just don’t know enough people!”

One place to begin being able to forgive – either others or ourselves – is to first admit that we do, in fact, have those uncomfortable feelings. While most of us might admit that there are people in our lives we don’t particularly like, it is a whole lot harder to admit that there are people we don’t even want to think about, let alone pray for! But – here’s the thing. If I can admit that my heart fights to keep certain people outside the boundaries of my love, I can at least begin asking

God to help me stretch those boundaries.

Jesus teaches, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Church historian Glenn Hinson suggests that sometimes the only way to love our enemies is to pray for them. I have certainly found it to be true that we cannot continue to despise a person for whom we regularly and sincerely pray. When we release pain and anger to God over people who seem impossible to embrace with love, the Spirit begins a mysterious process in our hearts. God reveals to us the enemy within our own divided self – the wounded, scary aspects of ourselves we have tried so hard to ignore, the sides of ourselves we are ashamed of.

We all long to go home, to always feel the grace and forgiveness of God. Deep down we know that it’s when we find our home in God’s grace, and when we are willing to share it with others, that we’ll find peace with who we are. After all, it’s in God’s grace that we’ll learn how to live in the world which makes us long for home in the first place.

When we are hungry and thirsty, God offers bread and cup. At this table to which he invites all of us, God gives grace to the ambitious, rest to the weary, comfort to the hurting, forgiveness and peace and joy to us all. All who are weary come home to God. All who are thirsty come to the waters. All who hunger eat what is good. Give up the security of a foreign land for the glorious journey home. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*This and other sermons during this Lenten Season are based upon a Lenten Study written by Marjorie Thompson, author, pastor and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation, which was printed in “The Thoughtful Christian” to which First Church subscribes. Thanks are also given this morning to Brett Younger for his sermon, “The Invitation”.*

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