

THE KING WAS IN THE COUNTING HOUSE

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Isaiah 55:1-2

Do you remember that bit of social commentary on life in merry Old England:

“Sing a song of six pence
A pocketful of rye,
Four and twenty blackbirds
Baked in a pie”?

If so, you recall it went on to describe a typical day in the life of the Royal Palace:

“The Queen was in the parlor
Eating bread and honey,
The King was in the counting house
Counting out his money.”

I've always thought there might be a sermon in that line about the “Queen in the parlour eating bread and honey”. According to Dave Garroway,

“Women have a terrific sense of humor. The more you humor them, the better they like it!”

I believe it was he who also observed that brides wear white as a symbol of their happiness and then added:

“The thing that bothers me is why the groom wears black!”

A fellow was applying for a job. The superintendent said,

“For this job we need a responsible man.”

The applicant replied,

“Boy, that's me! Whenever anything goes wrong at our house, my wife says I'm responsible!”

Well, ladies, we men-folk may joke about the trials and tribulations of being a husband, but the truth is we dearly love you gals and could not, nor would not for a moment be able to get along without you. But I just couldn't resist commenting on that stuff about "bread and honey".

Actually, my sermon is taken from that other line about "the King being in the counting house counting out his money." That sentence is strangely descriptive of the day in which we live, for far too many of us spend more time than we should in "the counting house."

We have amazing—to me bewildering and incredibly complicated—machines to help us with our counting. In recent years a brand new profession has sprung up having to do with the operation of computing machines and, I'm told it is a very skilled and profitable profession. There is one company in Hartford, Connecticut, which does nothing but compute figures and they carry their slogan on a gigantic billboard atop their factory:

"WE COUNT EVERYTHING!"

I suppose they do. Our whole world—physical, industrial, even social—has taken on a kind of "slide rule complex."

But take that phrase: "the counting house" into your mind and think of it in another connection—not as the room where we count out our money (that wouldn't take very long for most of us)—but where we *decide what things count!* Where we measure the *worth* of things.

Ours is an age which has sometimes been characterized as knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing. That may be unfair, but the big question for each of us is

"What things in life really do count in the long run?"

And, in the Christian sense, of course, that means the *really* long run: eternity!

The prophet Isaiah in the first and second verses of the 55th chapter of his book tackles this whole question of the values by which we live and he says:

"Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and

he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come,
buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not
bread, and your labor for that which does not
satisfy?"

The prophets' words reach down across the century to say three things to us this morning as we sit "in the counting house" trying to determine those things which really matter. For one thing, he points out that

Many People Spend Money and Effort for Things Which Do Not Satisfy.

Fame will not satisfy. Some people give their very lives for it, and then, having gained the greatest honors this world can give, discover they are not satisfied. They hunger for something more.

Pleasure will not satisfy. I am sure everyone of you would agree that mere worldly pleasure will not satisfy the aching hunger of a human heart. When Maxim Gorky visited Coney Island and saw the masses of people hurrying about in pursuit of pleasure, he said,

"What an unhappy people it must be that turns for
happiness here."

No, pleasure is not an adequate goal and yet there are those who give their lives in a pursuit of pleasure, only to discover they are never satisfied. They hunger for something more..

Money will not satisfy. In 1928, there was a meeting of some very important men in the Edgewater Beach Hotel here in Chicago. They were among our nation's most wealthy and successful citizens:

The president of the country's largest independent steel company.

The president of the nation's biggest utility company.

The president of the nation's greatest gas company.

America's greatest wheat speculator.

The president of the New York Stock Exchange.

A member of the president's cabinet.

The biggest "bear" in Wall Street.

The head of the world's greatest monopoly.

The president of the Bank of International Settlements.

By normal standards, these were eminently successful men to be envied and emulated. Had we seen them seated there, these men of power and wealth, surrounded by every evidence of affluence and worldly pomp, we might have found it difficult to suppress a feeling of envy.

King David once said *he* was envious when he beheld other people prospering without God. But then he added,

"I went to the House of God, and considered their latter end, and behold, they stand in slippery places."

Well, let's examine "the latter end" of those nine men:

The president of the nation's largest independent steel company, Charles Schwab, died in bankruptcy and lived on borrowed money during the last five years of his life.

Samuel Insull, president of the country's largest utility company, fled to Europe to escape the wrath of tens of thousands of investors whom he had bilked out of millions. He died penniless in a foreign land.

The president of the largest gas company—Howard Hopson—had a nervous breakdown and spent his last days in isolation.

he great wheat speculator, Arthur Cutten, died abroad insolvent.

Richard Whitney, president of the New York Stock Exchange, was

recently released from Sing Sing Prison.

Albert Fall, the member of the president's cabinet, was released from prison and pardoned so he could die at home.

Jesse Livermore, the great "bear" of Wall Street, died of suicide.

The head of the world's greatest monopoly—Ivar Kruegar—died of suicide.

The president of the Bank of International Settlements, Leon Fraser, committed suicide.

Jesus never discouraged wealth, but He did say it will not satisfy. And that's what our text is saying to us this morning.

"Why do you spend...your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

And yet all about us there are those who, having invested their lives in a panting, feverish pursuit of such things as fame, fortune, pleasure and power, discover they hunger for something more.

A second thought which comes to us from the prophet's word is that --

A Vital, Personal Faith Will Satisfy.

After suggesting there are some things whose acquiring still leaves us with a disturbing sense of emptiness, Isaiah goes on to say there is that which *will* satisfy our heart's desire.

He likens a vital faith to the things which are the very essentials of life in the ancient Near East:

Bread,

wine,

milk

and water.

Salvation is like *these* things, he says.

Even today we call bread the staff of life. It is one of the basic elements of our diet and so it is

not strange to hear Isaiah say:

“Salvation is bread for your soul. It will satisfy.”

Hundreds of years later, Jesus personalized those words and said,

“*I am* the bread of life. Whoever eats this bread shall never hunger.”

And, oh, how important water is. Very few of us have ever known real thirst. But those who have can never quite describe

the utter sense of panic,

the thickening of the tongue,

the dryness of the lips,

the debilitation which sets in

as every ounce of moisture seems to be extracted from your body and your mouth feels as if it was stuffed with wads of cotton.

Isaiah must have known something of that kind of insatiable thirst, for he had lived his life in the desert where silent oceans of sand are forever being shoved about by the lonely, restless wind. And having experienced, the life-giving quality of water, Isaiah puts his pen to parchment and writes that salvation is like water:

“It will satisfy,” he says.

Many years later, Jesus picked up that figure of speech and, as He looked upon the parched souls of spiritually thirsting people, He said:

“Whoever drinks the water that I shall give will never thirst again.”

Both Jesus and the writer of our text affirms that religious faith will satisfy. It is that essential staple without which life can never be complete.

And then, not only does Isaiah point out that people spend money and effort for things which do not satisfy, not only does He assert that a vital, personal faith *does* satisfy, but --

He Comes to a Conclusion.

I suspect that most of us would expect that conclusion to be:

“Therefore, since religion is a good investment, put your money and effort into acquiring a religious faith and it will repay you.”

That's the way we Americans look at life. We are always searching for something which will pay big dividends. We are pragmatists. If something works, we want it.

And religion works! It brings large, and often unexpected, benefits. And so we quite naturally expect Isaiah to say:

“Because religious faith fulfills the longing of the human heart, then put your money and effort into it, for it will pay.”

But that isn't what he says at all! He goes far beyond our human point of view and says something which is infinitely more wonderful:

“Salvation is free!”

This is a remarkable statement! But when you put it in the context of the Near East—the context in which Isaiah wrote it—it becomes astounding.

There has always been much haggling and bickering over prices in the Near East. They say that even today, for instance, in Egypt there are no less than five price scales:

The first is for native Egyptians.

The second is 10% higher, for people who are not native Egyptians, but who speak Arabic.

The third is 100% higher and is for people who do not speak Arabic, but who have black, brown or yellow skin.

The next level is 500% higher and is for Europeans.

The fifth and final level is without limit, gauged only by the gullibility of the buyer, and this level is reserved for American tourists!

In an environment where much of that same spirit existed, Isaiah stood and said:

“Salvation is free! You don’t have to haggle over the price. You may have it for the taking. Just ask for it and it is yours.”

Now that doesn’t mean we can stop taking offerings, so our finance committee can relax! As an old Negro preacher once said:

“The water of life is free, but you have to pay for having it piped to you.”

Indeed! But even more important, we have to pay to try to get it piped to some of the arid areas of the earth. Because we have freely received God’s wonderful gift of grace, we must freely give to show our gratitude and to share our faith with others.

But in the last analysis, salvation is free! As Peter Marshall once put it,

“It is God’s great gift. You can’t buy it nor can you earn it. It is not a reward dangling before the Christian like a carrot before a mule. It is not something the church has to peddle and, as a minister, I am not selling anything. Salvation is not for sale. It is a gift. It is given away.”

Of course, it is given away!

God’s forgiveness! How could you ever buy it?

God’s grace! How could you ever pay for it?

Prayer! How could you ever hope to purchase the right to have a private audience with almighty God?

And yet that is how it is: salvation satisfies and salvation is free!

So why, Isaiah asks, do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? And then he adds:

“Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!”

There is a story told about the great old organ in Freiberg, Germany. So magnificent was this instrument that on the day it was completed, it was acclaimed to be one of the wonders of the world. A special caretaker was commissioned to guard it carefully.

One day, the old custodian was summoned by a knock at the chapel door. When he opened the door, he found a young stranger weary and dirty from many miles of travel. At first the custodian thought the young man wanted food and shelter:

“Can I give you something to eat and a place to sleep?”

The young man shook his head.

“Oh, I did not come asking for food and shelter. I came to make a far greater request than that. Sir, I have come to ask that you give me the key that unlocks the manuals so I may play the Freiberg organ.”

The custodian raised his faithful old hands in horror and said,

“I can’t allow that. Only the great masters are allowed to play this instrument. If I should permit your hands to soil its keys, I would lose my position and my honor.”

The young stranger pleaded with the old man who held the organ keys. Then, seeming to have failed, he turned to leave. Somehow the look of dejection on his face and the stoop in his shoulders as he walked away got to the heart of the old custodian. He toddled after him and said,

“Alright, son, alright. If you promise never to tell a soul, if you promise never to tell anyone, I’ll give you the key to the Freiberg organ.”

The young man made his pledge and the old custodian led him down the aisle to the great instrument. The young man slipped into place with surprising ease. He fitted the key in the lock

and lifted back the cover. For a moment his fingers hovered over them almost afraid to touch them for fear of harming them.

The custodian went back to his dusting, but he did not dust for long. Suddenly the organ burst into song like a bird released from long confinement, as the sensitive fingers of the young stranger moved over black and white manuals and stops, weaving a melody that held the caretaker entranced.

Moments spun by—musical moments—painting the sunsets of every season, until the soul of the young artist lay exhausted and satisfied. Finally his ears called his eyes away from the great organ to the form of the old custodian kneeling beside him. Through his tears, the old man looked up and cried,

“Who are you and what is your name that you should play this organ so magnificently?”

“Oh, it matters little. It matters not at all,” said the stranger, “but if you wish to know, my name is Felix Mendelssohn.”

“Oh, what have I done,” cried the old custodian. “The master of the organ was here and I almost withheld the key.”

This morning, the master of all life is knocking at the door of your heart. He is saying, “Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.”

He is asking, “Make room in your heart for Me.”

Do not deny Him any longer. Do not withhold the key. As you sit in the counting house of life trying to determine what values are really true, take the long view—the really long view—that of eternity! Receive God’s Son as your Savior and He will cause your life to be filled with music which will never die.

Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters. You who have no money, come and eat. Come! Buy! Without money and without price.