

## ***From Earning to Receiving (Lent 3)***

Isaiah 55:1-9 (1 Corinthians 10:1-13)

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Luke, chapter 13, tells the story of when some people came up to Jesus and told him about a group of Galileans who were brutally murdered by Pilate, their blood spread on the offerings that they were bringing to God.

Jesus had been teaching about God's love and forgiveness. He also had been teaching about God's judgment of sin. In parables, in lectures, in answers to questions, Jesus taught them over and over, in different ways, to be ready, to be watching, and, most of all, to repent, to turn towards God, because the day of the Lord was coming, and no one – no one – is able to save themselves.

Luke doesn't tell us *why* these people reminded Jesus about what happened to those Galileans, but, based on Jesus' response, the implication is that they had heard in Jesus' words confirmation of what they already believed about those Galileans.

And, maybe their thinking was this:  
Because all people need to repent,  
because God is good,  
because God is sovereign and powerful,  
and because God is just,  
then, the reason for this terrible tragedy and others like them is . . .  
the sinfulness of the victims.

In other words, as awful as it was,  
those Galileans must have deserved what they got.

Of course, Jesus rejects that thinking.  
Do you think the suffering of those Galileans proves that they were worse sinners than other Galileans? Jesus asked.  
"I tell you, no!" he answered.

Or how about those eighteen who were killed in Jerusalem when the tower of Siloam fell on them?  
Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others in Jerusalem?  
"I tell you, no!" Jesus said again.

These aren't examples of God's judgment of victims, Jesus is saying.  
No, these are examples of why it's so important for everyone to repent.

No one – no one – is able to save themselves.  
Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!

Now, I think most of us understand what Jesus is teaching here.  
But even if we wouldn't dream of blaming victims for their suffering  
(which, by the way, would be worthwhile for us to think about  
because victims often get blamed for their suffering --  
particularly with overdoses, sexual assaults, and rape).  
But even if would never do that,  
we still tend to perpetuate the ideology that leads to it.

Three years ago, in March 2019,  
federal prosecutors charged thirty-three wealthy parents  
of paying bribes to get their children admitted to elite universities:  
Yale, Stanford, Georgetown, Cornell, and others.

A partner at a prestigious law firm paid \$75,000  
so that his daughter would be given  
the ACT score that she needed.

Felicity Huffman, a *Desperate Housewife*,  
paid \$15,000 to fix her child's SAT score.

Actress Lori Loughlin and her husband, fashion designer Mossimo Giannulli,  
paid \$500,000 to get their daughters admitted  
to USC as recruits to the rowing team.

They had no rowing experience.

I don't know about you,  
but, I, for one, was outraged at this news.

That's cheating!

These are examples of entitled parents paying for their entitled children  
to get opportunities they haven't earned  
to achieve success they don't deserve  
to enjoy rewards for which they didn't work  
while my children, for example, must scratch and claw for everything they get  
by relying on their superior intelligence,  
hard work, insightful essays, and overall goodness,  
objectively speaking.

And so, we think it's justice when  
wealthy elites are convicted for breaking the rules . . .  
while never questioning whether the rules we want enforced  
are a part of a system that leads to the same results.

Despite generous financial aid policies at Ivy League Universities, for instance  
there are more students from families in the top 1% of the income bracket  
than there are in the entire bottom half combined.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nils Gilman (interview with Michael Sandel), "The Dark Side of Meritocracy," *Noema* (December 7, 2021);  
<https://www.noemamag.com/the-dark-side-of-meritocracy/>.

They may follow the rules, but the whole system is rigged.

It's not fair.

Rich, poor. Men, women. Black, white.

Everyone should have a level playing field  
and the same chance to succeed as anyone else.

Right? Right.

Opportunities, success, and rewards should be based on skill and effort alone.

Right? Right.

Those entitled parents used their wealth  
to get their children what they didn't deserve.

Right? Right.

Those Galileans must have done something to deserve what they got.

Right? I didn't think you'd agree to that.

But do you see?

It's two sides of the same coin,  
a coin that is given or taken away  
based on some undefined appraisal of merit --  
what we think people deserve, what we think people have earned,  
what we think we deserve, what we think we have earned.

It's the ideology of meritocracy,  
the idea that people get ahead or should get ahead  
based on their own accomplishments,  
and that money, power, jobs are distributed or should be distributed  
according to skill and effort alone.

This ideology is foundational to the American Dream,  
but that dream has been a nightmare for so many people.

It's been a nightmare because it perpetuates  
the very inequalities that it seeks to eliminate.

And you know why?

It's because it's been built on the very back of those inequalities.

Justice, based on the ideology of meritocracy,  
only leads to injustice.

There's a growing body of research in psychology and neuroscience  
that suggests that even the belief in meritocracy  
makes people more selfish, less self-critical,  
more prone to act in discriminatory ways,  
and more tolerant of unequal outcomes.

For instance, a recent study from professors at MIT and Indiana University  
found that, in companies that tried to implement merit-based practices,  
such as performance-based compensation,  
managers assigned greater rewards

to male employees over female employees  
even though they had identical performance evaluations.<sup>2</sup>

That's because, these professors suggest,  
explicitly adopting meritocracy as a value  
convinces those managers of their own morality:  
"Satisfied that they are just" administrators of a just system,  
"they become less inclined to examine  
their own behavior for signs of prejudice."<sup>3</sup>

In the end, meritocracy justifies the status quo.  
It's a license for those with wealth and power  
to view themselves as talented and hardworking  
while seeing the poor and suffering as ignorant and lazy.  
And the thing is, even if you recognize that the system is rigged,  
even if you give loads and loads of your money  
and years and years of your life to help the poorest of the poor,  
the very idea that you have earned what you've got  
is a value judgment on those who haven't.<sup>4</sup>

As one writer put it,  
"The more that we think of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient,  
the harder it is to learn gratitude and humility,"  
the harder it is to care for the common good.<sup>5</sup>

This ideology is destructive not just those who are oppressed by poverty;  
it's destructive for all who abide by it.

It leads to a constant pressure  
to please more people, to achieve more things,  
to work more hours, to earn more money,  
in order to please more people, to achieve more things,  
to work more hours, to earn more money,  
in order to please more people, to achieve more things,  
to work more hours, to earn more money . . . and on it goes.

The god of the ideology of meritocracy is a false god,  
a god made in our image.

And the name of this god?  
I'm sure you've heard it.

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<sup>2</sup> Clifton Mark, "A Belief in Meritocracy is Not Only False: It's Bad for You, *Aeon* (March 8, 2019); <https://aeon.co/ideas/a-belief-in-meritocracy-is-not-only-false-its-bad-for-you>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Sandel, "Toppling the Myth of Meritocracy," [book excerpt, *Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*], *The Harvard Gazette* (January 5, 2021); <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/01/the-myth-of-meritocracy-according-to-michael-sandel/>.

It's The-God-who-Helps-Those-who-Help-Themselves.  
Thankfully, that's not the god we have.

Through the prophet, God speaks.  
Isaiah 55:1-9.

This passage begins with a Hebrew word that is not really a word,  
but kind of like an exclamation  
It's only right at the beginning – "Ho",  
but to get the feeling of this passage,  
I'm going to repeat it several times,  
So when I say "Hey," I want you to respond with "Ho"

[Hey], **Ho**, *everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!*

[Hey, **Ho**] *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?*

[Hey, **Ho**] *Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.*

*Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.*

[Hey, **Ho**] *I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.*

*See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the peoples.*

*See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you.*

[Hey, **Ho**] *AMEN.*

Free bread? Free milk? Free wine? Free water?

These words confound the ideology of meritocracy.

These words dismantle the logic of capitalist economies.

These words show not only God's goodness and God's providence;

they show that nothing is worthy to be exchanged for the gifts God gives.

These words call Israel to a renewed identity.

Most scholars agree that this prophecy was given  
while Israel was exiled in Babylon.

Dispossessed of the land, the temple, their homes,

they had to decide if and how they could continue to be God's people.

Back in Judah, each year the heralds of the king proclaimed  
a royal banquet for the commoners of Israel.  
And each year, the commoners ate to their heart's content  
the sort of food which only the royalty and nobility could afford the rest of the year.

In Babylon. Israel had no king –  
there were no royal banquets.

But through the prophet, God says,  
See, just as David called people to his banquet,  
so you shall call to nations that you don't know,  
and those nations shall run to you.

In exile and destitution  
Israel was called back to their true destiny,  
God's royal witness among the nations,  
eating and drinking in God's abundance,  
sharing in God's abundance.

The god of the ideology of meritocracy  
is not the God of the patriarchs and matriarchs,  
who claimed them and their families  
and promised to bless them and, through them, to bless the whole world.

It's not the God who heard the cries of the Israelite slaves in Egypt,  
who liberated them through the waters,  
who led them through the wilderness,  
who nourished them with manna and water,  
who delivered them to the land of promise,  
and who has been revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

To be clear, this *is* the God who helps those who *can't* help themselves,  
who saves those who *can't* save themselves,  
who intervenes on our behalf to liberate us  
from the ideologies and systems that value people  
for their health, their work and their production,  
and who frees us to receive what we can never earn:  
life in full, life with God,  
participating in God's work,  
creating, liberating, redeeming, nourishing,  
forgiving, reconciling, and transforming.

I hope you've heard in this sermon echoes  
of our worship series a few weeks ago focused on Sabbath.

The Sabbath is God's gift to reorient our lives,  
to cease our work, to rest with God and all of Creation,  
to embrace God's vision,  
and to feast with gratitude  
for what God has given and we have received.

It's been many months since we've gathered around tables to eat as a congregation.

It's been many months since we've gathered  
around the communion tables,  
eating and drinking in memory of Jesus.

The time is coming when we will do both.

The time is coming – Easter Sunday --  
when we will share in the Lord's Supper.

In the meantime, pay attention to your hungers and your thirsts --  
where do you go to be filled?

(Hey, **Ho**) Why spend money on what is not bread?

(Hey, Ho) Why labor for that which does not satisfy?

(Hey, **ho**) "Listen, listen to me," God says,  
"eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.  
Give ear and come to me, God says,  
hear me, that your soul may live."

We have not earned what we deserve.

No, we simply receive and share what God has given.

Thanks be to God.