

**Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ
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**Isaiah 55: 1-9
"How to Please"**

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It would be so pleasing to your mother if you... I remember that line so vividly from childhood. It would be pleasing to your mother if you... You could make your father happy if you... "If you." There's a stipulation, a qualification, a condition, a proviso. If only you did this, they would be happy; if you only did that, *I* would be happy. There's a condition to my happiness – that depends on you. It's a pretty heavy burden if you think about it. Their happiness depends on my behavior. *My* happiness depends on what *you* do. That might not be so bad, but we all know people who are just chronically unhappy. And, the more unhappy someone is, the harder we have to work. Ever hear or use this line: "I have done everything in my power to please that woman."

What pleases someone? There are a hundred books, almost all of them, however, are on *How to Please Your Man*, or *How to Please Your Woman*. There's even a book called *The Complete Idiots Guide to Pleasing Your Man*, and another one for your woman. You can probably guess what the "if you" in these books are. As I was searching, though, I was happy to find an article in *Ebony* magazine entitled, "How to Please Your Man without Losing Yourself." Now here's something helpful, I thought. I quote, "The key to being able to give to others is your own self-esteem," says Dr. Helen Davis Gardner, a psychiatrist in Chicago. "If you truly feel good about your inner self, that glow will reflect in your love for others. If you don't feel good about yourself, you can't openly support and nurture your man," she says, or anyone else. The title is actually much better than the suggestions that follow, which included, *How to Please Your Man*, "accept his flaws and choose better arguments." So much for loving yourself first... But the title does say something very important – pleasing without losing. There are times when what would make someone happy is for us to deny the very person that we are. Thank God my mother has never said it would please her if I wasn't gay. That is too high a price for anyone. I'm always sad for those who get married because that is what would please their parents.

On Tuesday night I opened our weekly Lenten group on the topic of "What Really Matters" with a simple question: "What do you wish someone would tell you?" Most of our answers were a variation on the theme of truth; "I want people to tell me the truth." I sometimes wonder how *much* truth I can handle either receiving or giving. I don't mean we should embrace lying, but certainly, for me, a measure of diplomacy is necessary to build trust to withstand truth. What do you wish someone would tell *you*? Truth is an excellent answer. But perhaps a more basic, a deeper, need is for someone to tell me, "I love you." Can you please me more, can you make me any happier, than to say "I love you."

There are lots of times in the Bible where I feel that there are conditions and qualifications for love, or at least we're told that. Sermons often have to do with "It would be pleasing to God if you..." "You could make God happy if only you..." Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. Love one another. Feed the hungry; clothe the naked, visit the prisoner. These are absolutely our calling. There is no doubt that these are the marks, the expectations, the very *definition* of discipleship. They are not, however, the stipulations, the conditions, the qualifications, the provisos for God's love. It would be pleasing to God if you... But that's not where it starts. Our very existence, first and foremost, the fact that we *are* is pleasing to God. We must never be confused about needing to earn God's love in order to please God. God's love is not earned. God's love just is. It may not make sense. You may want to protest and say "no," we have to do something. We are, in fact, *commanded* to love one another. But long before that, God loves us. Loving one another is not a condition of God loving us.

Now God knows I'm not trying to imply that we can just sit on our behinds and simply take whatever we want, act in any way we feel, and contribute nothing of ourselves to humanity. That's not an acceptance of grace; that's just being lazy. My message today is not for the lazy; my message today is for the tired, for those who run ragged by their insistence that they may be found pleasing in God's eyes. It is for those who think there are certain conditions they must meet first before God will judge them worthy of true love.

People of faith from the beginning of time have struggled with this. One of the commentators on this passage from Isaiah 55 wrote: "At the heart of Israelite theology is the struggle between the belief in God as a judge who rules by divine law, and the belief in God as a God of compassion and mercy. God routinely violates God's own laws in order to have mercy on God's people. It is not logical for a God of justice to waive the punishment that Israel so justly deserves. No human judge would set aside his or her own laws so freely. However, God is God and not a human being, and so God can do whatever God pleases."¹

¹ Homiletics Online, Isaiah 55: 1-9, 3/14/2004

Let's look at the text more closely. This is God speaking: *"Hey there! All who are thirsty, come to the water! Are you penniless? Come anyway – buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money – everything's free."*²

Well, how in the world are we supposed to do that? You can't buy something if you don't have any money to buy it with. And then God continues by saying *"eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest."*

That's even more illogical. The poor never get the best of anything. God continues, *"I'm making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring love."*

Back to what does and what doesn't make sense: David made a royal mess out of his relationship with God. Why would David be used as an example of a good witness to other nations? David had an illicit affair with his neighbor's wife and had her husband killed before he found out his wife was pregnant with David's baby – it's *As the World Turns*. And that's just *one* example. Why would God compare the commitment God was now making again with Israel to the mess David had created? David was not the model for a functional, healthy relationship. Not in our eyes, anyway. But, God never stopped loving David; and God will never stop loving Israel – constant covenant-breakers or not. Messed up, dysfunctional relationship or not, God doesn't operate on a "three strikes and you're out" rule. That's good news for you and for me.

For a little context on our passage, the book of Isaiah is actually three books written in three different distinct periods in Israel's history. The first book, chapters 1-39, focuses on the period of the original prophet Isaiah who warned the people that their constant injustice will result in their being carried off into exile. This was written about 700 years before Christ. About 250 years later, the second book of Isaiah focuses on the promise of a joyous return from exile to a restored and purified homeland and temple. Chapter 55, the last in this second book, is what we read today, and it ends with the beautiful promise of a renewed and everlasting covenant. *"Let them come back to God, who is merciful; let them come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness."* In the third book of Isaiah, chapters 56-66, they are dealing with the struggle of being back home and the slow process of restoration. It's like coming home to New Orleans. Being back at home isn't the end of their troubles. But our chapter today is about God's unconditional grace extended to a nation that we may or may not judge to be worthy of God's continued blessing.

² Scripture quotes from The Message by Eugene Peterson

We, not surprisingly, ask why? Why would God not have given up on them long ago, moved on? To quote Isaiah, "*Because God, the Holy of Israel, has honored you.*" Why? "*Because your ways are not my ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts, declares the Lord.*" Why? "*For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think.*" So we say, thank God! Thank *you* God! But still, why? It simply pleases God to do so.

Before, during, and after every screw-up we can rest assured on the lasting covenant that God made with Israel: grace triumphs over whatever justice could be demanded of us. Grace will prevail. More than giving us what we might deserve, God is pleased to grant us unconditional, "unqualifiable(!)" "unstipulationable(!)" grace – *unconditional* grace. How do we please God? Be. St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." How do we please God? Be. It may please God when we love one another, but first, God is pleased that we simply are.

Back in seminary in Minneapolis, as I was sorting out what denomination to belong to, I attended one church with a big choir, a great music program, lots of friendly people, but during each sermon I grated my teeth and gripped my chair more firmly every week. Every sermon was about how "God loves you just the way you are." I didn't disagree; it's absolutely essential that we not only hear that message but that we immerse ourselves, cover ourselves, with such healing balm. I just wanted more. I wanted, "yes," and now what. I found in the UCC sermons that challenged me, sermons that laid out the expectations of discipleship, that really stretched me intellectually – love one another. But thinking back, I can't remember much said about love for me. We just can't be pleased can we!?

How to please someone who is hard to please is an eternal dilemma, an exhausting exercise in patience and good will. How to please God is not. There's no condition, no stipulation, no qualification, no proviso. It is simply God's good pleasure that we exist. And yes, God loves you just the way you are.