

**“WE WHO THIRST”**  
**Isaiah 55:1-13; Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9**  
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I have a favorite poem. Many of you already know that and have heard the poem before. But some things are worth repeating, and this poem is one of them. In the 30 years I have been seriously studying the Bible, it is the best general guide to interpretation I have ever found. I look at it almost every day. The poem is by Billy Collins, and titled, “Introduction to Poetry.” It reads:

*I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,  
or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.  
I want them to water ski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.*

I love this poem! It reminds me that “serious” analysis is not always the best way to approach or understand the literature of the Bible, especially passages like this morning’s offering from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Written as poetry, it invites us to enter the kingdom of God less with our analytical brains and more with our hearts and our imaginations.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price.” I think of market day in a busy town, smells and brightly colored displays all round. The vendors are lined up, coaxing customers to choose their stall, customers valuable only for the coin they bring in trade for goods. And over and against that common marketplace, on the opposite side of a dirt road invites the uncommon one of God, “Everyone who thirsts, you come here. You who have no coin (yes, even you, especially you), you come and eat and be fed, because what is important about you to me is not the coin you bring, nor the coins you have accumulated, nor the coins you offer me.” What is important here is simply you and me, and what you thirst for, and how I can quench that

thirst, and that you are hungry, and I long to feed you. There is no commerce here, no units of measurement; just our deepest desires and God's answering "yes."

Over and over in the Bible, we are told in word and image how we are loved and sought by God, how God accepts us for who and what we are, loves us even as we stand: imperfect in this moment. You would think that we who come to church every Sunday would know this to be true, know it not just as the central intellectual content of this wonderful and complex book that we call the Bible, but know it with our hearts and our imaginations. You would think that we who call ourselves God's people, who seek to serve the world on God's behalf, that more of us would really get it. Deep down get it. "You who are thirsty, come to the waters. You who have no money, come buy and eat."

But the fact is that we don't, most of us. We don't really trust God's love in an important way, in a life-changing way. It's hard enough to trust human love. I can't tell you how many times in my career, as I have talked with people about their relationships—their best relationships with partners, with family, with friends—the most important story they have to tell is about the moment when this particular person finally understood that they were loved by another. They tell me, "I realized I wasn't just fooling my best friend"; or "my husband *really* knows all that is petty and whiny and unattractive about me"; or "my mom caught me cheating," or something else horrible and disappointing. And after that discovery, despite what they know, these people still love the beloved.. Just as they are. There is nothing more shocking, nothing more humbling and freeing than that moment of coming to trust in another's love, and there is nothing more powerful in our lives than that knowledge going forward that we are the recipients of that love.

What do we thirst for? We thirst to be both fully known and fully loved. We thirst for one who will feed us when we are hungry, feed us abundantly, deliciously, with no need, not even any thought for coin in return: love freely given, ourselves able to receive freely in return. Most of us are wise enough to know that when we find such a love with another person—parent, child, grandparent, lover, friend—it is a treasure beyond price. To hold such a treasure changes us. It fills us up, and the truth is that those who are not worried every minute about that for which they hunger and thirst are those who have the energy to serve, even to change the world.

We are known and loved by the God of heaven and earth. We—all people—we are God's beloved ones. We can trust that reality. We can lean on it, depend on it, hold ourselves close in it. So believe it! In this season of Lent, work at trusting God, not just as an intellectual construct, but with your hearts and your imaginations. Walk inside the room of that reality for a while and explore. Water ski across the surface of that deep, deep lake. You will know when you encounter what you are yearning for. For you will be fed, and your thirst will be slaked, and you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. And all the trees of the field will clap their hands! Thanks be to God. Amen.