



**A Sermon from Dr. Jody Seymour, Senior Pastor  
Davidson United Methodist Church  
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**The Sermon Text: Isaiah 55:1-9**

**Full but Empty**

Is this container of water I hold half full or half empty? Without measuring the contents or removing any of the water, how can you tell if it is half full or half empty? The answer is to tilt the container until the water barely touches the tip of the container. If you can see the bottom of the container, it is half empty; if you cannot see the bottom, then it is half full.

When it comes to your life, are you mostly full or half empty? What are we filling our lives with? Today is a day to ask the question. Are we filling our lives with that which leaves us full or empty? The haunting question comes from our text today when the prophet asks, "Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

One person puts it this way, "One day your life will flash before your eyes. Make sure it's worth watching." C.S Lewis once said, "What does not satisfy when we find it was not the thing we were desiring."

But today my role is not to be your financial advisor so I'm not going to offer advice about how you are saving or spending money. It is not my task to assess if your 401 K is half empty or half full. Neither am I a nutritionist, whose task it is to pester you about all that junk food we fill ourselves with that leaves us empty in terms of long term health.

Alas, I am at best a spiritual advisor who offers these ancient words of a prophet who warns the people of long ago that they are eating bread that will not satisfy and drinking that which will not quench thirst. So I ask you today a question of faith. Is our faith a healthy faith that fills our hungry spirits, or are we eating junk food that seems to fill us up but leaves us empty? Are we drinking in a kind of religion that in the end will leave us wanting?

Willow Creek Church did a study recently to see if the people who came to church were filled enough that their religion made a real difference in their daily lives. They studied over 1,000 people who regularly attended church. Their study showed that the pews are full of empty people.

What is healthy religion? I will tell you this - from my observations, there are a lot offerings these days on the spiritual buffet. Some of them are not good for us; they may fill us up, but they are not healthy choices.

We must remember that a good deal of religion is a product of our human longing and need. In the midst of the need for spiritual renewal in 500 years before Jesus the prophet Isaiah



speaks for God and God says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord...my ways are higher than your ways.”

I often say when I speak of spiritual matters that religion is the plumbing, the pipes; and the spirit of God is the water. We are not to worship the pipes nor is my job to be a plumber. Religions purpose is to offer life-giving water.

Gordon Allport studied religion to determine both its function and level of health. He came up with two categories of religion. There is intrinsic religion, which offers meaning and constitutes a purpose for life. Intrinsic religion provides a framework for living and is an end in itself. Extrinsic religion is a means to an end; it is a self-serving vehicle by which to achieve comfort. It helps one to adapt to social conventions.

Our prophet today is trying to get us to distinguish between these two types of religion and states that one will fill us with good things while the other will fill us with that which will never satisfy. A recent study by the National Institute for Healthcare Renewal found that intrinsic religion that offers real connection to religious beliefs and practices produces healthier people than the extrinsic type where people go to church for appearances.

Two instances of people who come to Jesus with the need for some healthy spirituality instead of the stale bread they are eating are Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the well. Nicodemus comes with his rules and his doctrines only to discover that the spirituality Jesus offers is more like the wind than a rule.

The thirsty woman at the well reminds Jesus of where the proper place to worship is and lays out some expectations of the religion of the day. Jesus offers her living water and tells her that God will no longer be confined to one mountain or one place, but will be found by those who seek the truth in love.

So what is healthy, filling spirituality and what are the symptoms of a kind of religion that offers bread that will not satisfy and water that will not quench thirst? Here are four questions to ask to see if one's religion is healthy (Dr. Gary Nicolosi):

- 1- Does my religion give me a sense of freedom and self-acceptance?
- 2- Does my religion make me more loving to other people especially those with whom I disagree?
- 3- Does my religion help me be more tolerant of other people?
- 4- Does my religion make me more able to share my resources with others to make the world a better place?

A behavioral health consultant who studies the differences between psychologically healthy religion and works with the results of damaging unhealthy religion finds that unhealthy religion tends to be a closed kind of thinking that emphasizes rituals and doctrine. Healthy religion takes in the facing of insecurity and vulnerability because it is based on love.



Here are some differences in healthy spirituality and the unhealthy kind (from the work of Steven Kales):

- healthy religion honors developmental stages and encourages movement through those stages...the unhealthy type impedes this development and shames those who attempt to move from one stage to the next
- healthy religion is not threatened by creative passion, whereas unhealthy religion is afraid of this creative force and constrains it or punishes it
- healthy religion is not anti-intellectual...unhealthy religion is afraid of certain questions
- healthy religion respects both male and female...unhealthy religion tends to be marked the putting down of women
- the goal of healthy religion is wholeness and the freedom wholeness invites...the goal of unhealthy religion is blind conformity and control.
- unhealthy religion is a bully....

In the book, “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality,” the author lists some principles that lead to a healthy spirituality that fills instead of leaving one empty:

- the ability to look beneath the surface
- the ability to break the power of the past
- the ability to live with brokenness and vulnerability
- the ability to receive the gift of limits
- the ability to embrace grief and loss
- the ability to make incarnation your model for loving well
- the ability to slow down and lead with integrity

I guess you might say that healthy religion is a religion of the “yes” rather than the constant shout of the “no.” Jonathan Swift once said, “We have enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love.”

Studies show that spiritual health is delayed by the negative spirits of legalism, prejudice, ignorance, hypocrisy, and anger (Rembert Truluck). It seems that healthy religion embraces the advice from I Corinthians 13 to, “Throw a cloak of silence over what is displeasing in another person.” To eat the bread of healthy spirituality is to be reminded of the need for daily prayer, to be able to think about your faith, to be able to love...especially to love those who are different from you, to be able to embrace and internalize beliefs, and to be able to maintain an ability to take a good look at yourself before you size up others.

Or in other words, a healthy spirituality remembers to:

- Pray daily
- Look closely...at yourself before you look/judge others
- Give generously
- And Love deeply...especially those different from you



So today we come to the Lord's Table to receive the offer of bread we did not buy and wine we did not produce. This is the table of Eucharist, which means thanksgiving for grace given. This bread will not fill you up. You can do that at McDonalds from indulging from the Dollar Menu. For not much money you can really get full, but as we all know that will leave us empty in another way.

This (hold up bread) is not from the Dollar Menu. This cost a lot because love often does. But it is ultimately love....hard love that will fill us up.

So today here is what I offer you. Bring to this table your emptiness. I do not know its source, but hopefully you do. This table is not the journey...this is bread for our wilderness and wine for our journey...This will help you take your journey.

This small amount of bread and taste of the fruit of the vine is offered by one who helped Nicodemus follow not a set of rigid rules, but the wonderful wind of the Spirit. After encountering Jesus, Nicodemus was never the same. He learned how to take chances in his faith and be vulnerable instead of just being a rule keeper and doctrine shouter.

This cup is offered by one who reminded a thirsty woman at a well that she was invited to drink when all the religious types of her day told her she was not worthy because she had not kept the guidelines nor colored between the lines. He helped her find truth and challenged her shallow loves.

Come to the table with your half empty religion...and be filled...