* **Weekender**
* **Series Slide**
* I’m starting today with a Seinfeld reference, which is as natural to me as breathing.
* There is an episode of Seinfeld- where Elaine Benes’ character storyline is that she goes to use the restroom in a public toilet and discovers that there is no toilet paper. So she kindly requests that the lady in the stall next her share some of her toilet paper.
* To which the lady replies, “No, I’m sorry. I can’t spare it. There’s not enough to spare.”
* Elaine says, “Well I don’t need much, three squares will do it.”
* “I’m sorry,” the lady says, “I don’t have 3 squares, now if you don’t mind…”
* “3 squares?!? you can’t spare 3 squares?”
* “No. I don’t have a square to spare. I can’t spare a square.”
* And the woman leaves the restroom with Elaine begging her not to go.
* **“I can’t spare a square**” is one of the enduring lines from the Seinfeld TV series because we can identify with finding ourselves in situations of scarcity…where it feels like what we have is only enough for us. And even when we know that another person is in need, helping them just seems like it would cost us too much.
* Remember at the beginning of this pandemic- how toilet paper suddenly and somewhat inexplicably- disappeared from grocery store shelves overnight?
* You better believe that episode of Seinfeld came rushing back into my mind.
* But, despite the hoarding that was going on in the grocery store, there were a lot of folks who were sparing squares- or even entire packages of toilet tissue to help other people out.
* Someone unexpectedly dropped a package off at my house during the shelter at home quarantine. I remember taking a walk through our neighborhood and seeing a roll of it in the little library box- where you could help yourself if you were in need.
* Its funny how outside of the context of a pandemic where my access to TP was limited, I would have looked at a package of toilet paper dropped off on my front porch as a joke. Maybe like a lazy version of rolling my yard.
* BUT- in the context of scarcity- toilet paper on my doorstep suddenly transformed into an act of love and generosity.
* The final scene in that episode of Seinfeld ends where it started. In the ladies room. With the same two pairs of shoes visible underneath the stall door.
* The same woman who refused to share her toilet paper says unknowingly to Elaine, “I’m sorry. There’s no toilet paper over here, would you mind sharing?”
* To which Elaine replies. “I’m sorry I don’t have a spare to square”. And then her stall bursts open with her arms full of toilet paper rolls as she sprints to the exit.
* **Title Slide “Spare a Square: How Fasting Reveals Your Limits & Feasting Overflows Them”- Nehemiah 8-9**
* And that’s it.
* 2 ways of replying to scarcity.
* One that doesn’t spare squares and hoards resources to repay our enemies.
* The other, that even in the midst of scarcity- doesn’t just spare squares. But considers others needs more important than your own- and gives entire packs of Charmin away in the middle of a pandemic
* One of these is the Way of Jesus. One is not.
* Today- I want to introduce you to 2 practices that will help to make you the kind of person that doesn’t just spare squares- but lives a generous life in the face of scarcity.
* There are many, many examples of the practice of Fasting and Feasting in Scripture, but lets go to Nehemiah 8 & 9 to take a look at them today.
* Since I’m plunking us down in the middle of an OT book this morning, let me tell you the story of Nehemiah up to this point.
* The people of Israel had been overtaken by the Babylonians and carried off to Exile in Babylon.
* Decades later, a king let those who wanted to go back and live in Jerusalem leave.
* Nehemiah was not one of those, because he had a really good gig with the King. He was the cupbearer. Which means he got to sit next to the Babylonian king and taste all his food…just in case it was poisoned.
* But one day, one of the leaders of the people who had returned to Jerusalem came back. And he delivered some troubling news.
* Jerusalem was in ruins. And most of the Israelites didn’t seem to care. All the walls around the city were broken down…and the town was very vulnerable to attack.
* So Nehemiah, asks the King for a leave of absence…and a ton of building materials- and he goes back to Jerusalem to lead a rebuilding project for the city.
* So Nehemiah rallies Israel, they rebuild the walls and the city…but that’s not all.
* In all the construction, they uncover something they had lost. The Bible. Well, Torah- or God’s law. The first 5 books of the Old Testament. In so many years of exile, living in Babylon- many people had forgotten what it said.
* And that’s where we pick up today. The Israelites, in their rebuilt city.
* **Nehemiah 7:73-8:3**
* **When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had given Israel.**
* **2 On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. 3 While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law.**
* **8:8-18**
* **8 They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read. 9 Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, “Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the Lord is your strength.” 11 And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, since today is holy. Don’t grieve.” 12 Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them.**
* **13 On the second day, the family heads of all the people, along with the priests and Levites, assembled before the scribe Ezra to study the words of the law. 14 They found written in the law how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should dwell in shelters during the festival of the seventh month. 15 So they proclaimed and spread this news throughout their towns and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the hill country and bring back branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make shelters, just as it is written.” 16 The people went out, brought back branches, and made shelters for themselves on each of their rooftops and courtyards, the court of the house of God, the square by the Water Gate, and the square by the Ephraim Gate. 17 The whole community that had returned from exile made shelters and lived in them. The Israelites had not celebrated like this from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day. And there was tremendous joy. 18 Ezra read out of the book of the law of God every day, from the first day to the last. The Israelites celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.**
* **9:1-3**
* **On the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites assembled; they were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads.**
* **2 Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. 3 While they stood in their places, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the Lord their God**
* **Transition:** You might have noticed in this passage there is some emotional whiplash. First- Israel gathers together for what seemed like it was going to be a celebration- they had just finished rebuilding their city… and now it seemed like time to party….but then Ezra starts reading the Bible- and they all start weeping. But Ezra commands them to have a party. To celebrate. Then after that they go into a fast and put dust on their heads.

Let me show you why.

**1) Fasting confronts bad overflow.**

* + Lets start with the fast.
  + When Israel comes out of their celebration- they immediately stat a nation-wide fast.
  + A fast is a period of time that you go without food, in order to re-connect with God in prayer a to self-examine in order to confess your sins to God…and come out with a renewed sense of God’s presence in your life and your dependence on him.
  + **9:3**
  + Fasting is NOT just skipping a meal or 2!
  + Notice what is contained in Israel’s fast..in the place of not eating.
  + There is a focus on the Word of God…
  + … a focus on confession of sin….
  + ….and a focus on worship…
  + And ALL 3 of those happen in the prayer that fills the majority of the verses of chapter 9.
  + We didn’t read them earlier, but let me show you now.
  + **9:5b (start at Blessed)**
  + The prayer starts with an attitude of worship.
  + Worship just means that you recounting to God…and to each other…why God is WORTH something.
  + Why he is WORTHY of being praised…and loved…and followed.
  + That’s how they open their prayer here.
  + **9:6**
  + Then- their prayer turns into a restating of the story God has told them in his law. They start where the Torah starts- in creation-
  + **9:9**
  + …and it follows along through God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt…which is the primary act of salvation in the OT.
  + **9:13**
  + Then they remember the story of God delivering his law to them. Establishing his covenant. A promise of his never-giving-up attachment love.
  + **9:15**
  + Then there is a focus on how God kept his promises…and provided for them.
  + **9:16**
  + And then the story shifts- to the sin of Israel.
  + And the rest of the chapter- the rest of the prayer during this fast…is all about how God was faithful- how he kept on delvering them and providing for them…
  + …and yet Israel kept going their own way, complaining. Forgetting God and his covenant.
  + **9:37b-9:38a (start at “we are in great distress” end at “agreement”)**
  + Eventually, all this remembrance, this meditation on God’s word, this worship, brings them – to a point recognizing their weakness- their dependence on God- and they renew their covenant vow with God. A promise to follow his commands- and they make a plan to do it together.
  + **9:16**
  + Now, lets go back to the verse where this prayer pivots.
  + This word here for “acted arrogantly” or presumptuously- literally means to heat up and boil over. It's the Hebrew word ZUD. (zood)
  + So when Israel became proud and refused to listen to God, they BOILED OVER. They acted outside of their limitations.
  + Think about when a pot boils over. It heats up- and it overflows its limitations. It also makes a mess that you have to clean up.
  + We’ve been looking a lot at our emotions during this series. And often- when our emotions boil over in the wrong way…when our anger gets the best of us, or our over-zealousness- or our shame- or our sometimes- even our happiness…we can overflow our limits. Boil over- in our actions.
  + We throw things, break things- we do and say things we might not mean. We make promises we don’t keep to try and save face.
  + In other words, we forget our limits. We forget that we are not God and cannot fix all the worlds injustices by throwing a remote control against the wall. Or we cannot repair trust in a day by making a bunch of empty promises. We forget to depend on God.
  + WE OVERFLOW our limits. That's what it means to ZUD.
* **Back to 1)**
  + Fasting resists ZUD. Because the very nature of fasting shows you your limits and confronts ZUD head on.
  + Fasting is the equivalent to turning down the heat on the pot…
  + When you fast- you have a physical reminder of your limitations. You are humbled.
  + Because even missing one meal- I start to develop a headache- I feel weaker…I can’t perform as well physically. ONE MEAL!
  + Not only that, as I’m praying and meditating on God’s word during a fast- its like taking a cold shower. I’m brought back to earth. Reminded that God is present- that I am sinful- but God is still present. And it gives God a chance in that moment to speak to me in my weakness- and give me a more clear idea of how he wants to work in my life.
  + Fasting confronts ZUD- bad overflow.
* Transtion: BUT FEASTING- Feasting is its own kind of overflow of our limits…but in a much better way.
* **2)**  **Feasting enables good overflow.** 
  + IN that final scene of that episode of Seinfeld, when Elaine runs out of the stall hoarding all the toilet paper to get back at her enemy…she is executing ZUD. She is boiling over. Acting like God. Controlling the justice her enemy gets. And doing so, by hoarding her resources.
  + But that’s not what feasting does. Feasting does the opposite. Feasting lavishes its friends and enemies with good things…even in the face of scarcity.
  + Feasting- celebration- is an avenue to overflow in a good way.
  + Take a look.
  + **8:9**
  + Ezra and Nehemiah and all the priests see everyone mourning and crying as they read Scripture- and they say- hold on, hold on, hold on!
  + “There’s no crying in Baseball!”
  + **8:10**
  + Nehemiah and Ezra are the first Beastie Boys.
  + They say- “God had to fight. For your right. To PAAAAARRRRRTAAAAY!”
  + This is incredible!
  + God wants you to celebrate.
  + When they say “The joy of the Lord is your strength”- what they are essentially saying is “The main point of the Bible is not for you to be down and sad about your sin. The main point of the Bible is Joy. God is not mainly angry or sad about your sin. God is mainly full of joy.”
  + While you need to think about your sin- and you need to confess it and turn from it…and while there is a time for doing this…
  + Scripture leads us to a God of joy- of feasting- celebration- not a God of grief and despair.
  + Did you hear me?
  + GOD’s MAIN characteristic is to OVERFLOW JOY to you. We are Strengthened when we what God gets happy about.
  + And notice what that does?
  + Did you see here when they party- its not just about them- they are instructed to “send portions to those who have nothing prepared”
  + That’s overflow. That’s looking around at your party and saying- “Who’s not here- we need to make them a plate” instead of saying- Only those who have the resources can use the resources.

**Back to 2)**

* + Listen in a time of scarcity- when you feel like you don’t have enough- NOTHING- absolutely nothing will point to the Joy of the Lord by Giving like you have everything.
  + We’ve been talking about tapping into the Kingdom of God.
  + And last week about SEEING the UNSEEN. The Eternal.
  + Those who SEE- those who know the KoG is at hand…when it looks like they have nothing- they give more than anyone else to others.
  + Remember when Jesus saw a poor widow giving an offering. He contrasted her to the rich who weren’t overflowing their limits, but giving in a non-sacrifical way.
  + **Luke 21:1-4**
  + **He also saw a poor widow dropping in two tiny coins. 3 “Truly I tell you,” he said,“this poor widow has put in more than all of them. 4 For all these people have put in gifts out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”**
  + Or how about what Paul says about the Macedonian church.
  + **2 Corinthians 8:2**
  + **During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.**
  + Out of ABUNDANT JOY- their extreme poverty overflowed!
  + How does poverty OVERFLOW into generosity?!?!?!
  + That right there is Kingdom of God math. I bet the Macedonian’s threw the best parties- even though they were poor.
  + Remember the story of the Prodigal son in Luke 15?
  + The ungrateful Son takes his Father’s money- goes off to a distant country and forgets about his father. Until he is forced into a fast. He is starving- and he remembers his limitations.
  + And he remembers the goodness of this Father.
  + So he returns home to try to get a job with his Dad.
  + But his Father- in abundant joy- runs out to meet his son…and remember what he says?
  + **Luke 15:22-24**
  + **22 “But the father told his servants, ‘Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let’s celebrate with a feast, 24 because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! ’ So they began to celebrate.**
  + In joy- he celeberates his son’s return- with a party!
  + Now watch the overflow.
  + **Luke 15:25-32**
  + **25 “Now his older son was in the field; as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he summoned one of the servants, questioning what these things meant. 27 ‘Your brother is here,’ he told him, ‘and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’**
  + **28 “Then he became angry and didn’t want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 But he replied to his father, ‘Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’**
  + **31 “ ‘Son,’ he said to him, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’**
  + The Father goes out to his older son- who only wants to celebrate if its about HIM- and his Father in love and overflow of joy- says COME IN AND CELEBRATE WITH ME.
* **Back to 2)**
  + Do you know what the word PRODIGAL means?
  + It means wasteful.
  + And in the story of the prodigal there are 3 “wasteful” people.
  + One is the younger son- who WASTES his father’s money.
  + The second is the father- who in the eyes of the listening Pharisees was wasteful with his resources- he shouldn’t thrown a party for the younger son!
  + He should have shunned him. Punished him. Made him be sorry for the day he dishonored his family. This party- in the eyes of the listenitng Pharisees- was a waste.
  + But in the end- there is only one truly wasteful person in this story.
  + It's the older son- who’s refusal to share in the joy of his Father- wastes the relationship he has. Wastes the nearness of the Father.
  + The same way we was the nearness of God when we live a life filled with ZUD- overflowing the wrong way.
  + The Kingdom of God is near. Celebrate!
* **8:17**
  + Have you ever read Dr. Seuss’ How the Grinch Stole Xmas?
  + Remember how the Grinch thinks in his cynicism thinks that the only reason the HOOS have so much joy at Xmas is because of the toys and gifts.
  + So he steals all their stuff and then he hears them singing.
  + **“Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,  
    Was singing! Without any presents at all!  
    He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!  
    IT CAME!  
    Somehow or other, it came just the same!  
      
    And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,  
    Stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so?  
    'It came without ribbons! It came without tags!  
    It came without packages, boxes or bags!'  
    And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.  
    Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!”**
  + **What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”**
  + When the Israelites re-discover the festival of shelters…or the feast of booths…
  + It's a Grinch like conversion
  + They had forgotten the meaning of this festival.
  + It was a celebration of God’s deliverance of their people.
  + It wasn’t just an excuse to party- they were partying about something.
  + And whether they were in Babylon or Jerusalem, whether they lived in lack or abundance- that truth was still TRUE.
  + And the result- TREMENDOUS JOY!

Of course the ultimate act of joy- is found in Jesus. He is the one performed the act of deliverance we needed to be set free from the condemnation of our ZUD.. Our sin. Our stiff-necked resistance to the Father who wants us to come home.

**Hebrews 12:2**

* + The writer of Hebrews says we are to keep our eyes on Jesus- who for the JOY set before him, despised the shame…and sat down at the right hand of God- the seat at the head of the table of the marriage feast of the Lamb that is to come.
  + Jesus joy is all the prodigals coming home.
  + That’s why he went through the shameful act of dying exposed on a criminals cross. He was opening the door the party. He was forgiving you, he was taking the penalty and pain for your ZUD- your overflowing of your limitations- and overflowing His HESED- AGAPE- NEVER GIVING UP ATTAHCMENT LOVE.
* **Romans 12:1**
  + And because of that mercy- we now are to be living sacrifices- this is the only kind of worship that makes sense- To overflow for others like he overflowed to us. WITH JOY set before us.
* **Back to 2)**
  + Yes- your life may be full of pain…
  + Yes- you it may seem you live in a dry desert- without a square to spare.
  + Yes- it is counter intuitive to slaughter the fattened calf for your prodigal son when that very son just wasted a third of your savings account.
  + Yes- you are despising the shame.
  + But joy has been set before you.
  + Life has been given in your death.
  + Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again!
  + Take heart. The Feast is coming. The Kingdom of God is near. You have everything you need for life and godliness. You are lacking in nothing.
  + SO in scarcity- overflow generosity.
  + Literally, for God’s sake, Spare a Square.
  + From your poverty- overflow generosity. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

**ROOTED Practice- Choose one meal per week and replace it with prayer.**

* + **Prayer walk**
  + **Breath prayer**
  + **“Whatcha got, God?”**
* **GOOD LIFE Practice- Choose dates for a 1/month celebration of God’s work for the next 6 months.**

Speak about this at your party. (OMATAYO EBBAH)