

Having Our Fill

Last week, we looked at two miracle stories from the Gospel According to John, the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water, and how those stories signaled God's amazing, loving provision for us. Through Christ Jesus, we learned, God saves us from hunger, selfishness, and fear. Whether we understand those stories to involve the supernatural creation of food out of nothing and the literal footsteps of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee or whether we understand them as Jesus creating a sacred time and space where generosity and peace can flourish in the midst of life's troubles or whether we hold both views as meaningful, the message is the same: we are loved by God who provides all good things for us and we are called to love and provide for each other in turn.

This morning, we will begin with the story in Exodus that foreshadows the stories of Jesus' miraculous feeding of crowds and then pick up the story in John 6 following the two miracles. Once again, the primary theme is God's all-sufficient provision for us. But we will also look this morning at how some of God's people have turned their backs on that provision; on how they refused to trust and at how the failing of greed marred their relationship with God. We'll consider how that sign of deep brokenness and rebellion has continued to plague humankind and we'll ask ourselves how we have fallen into the greed trap. Are we greedy and selfish with that which God provides for the nourishment of our bodies? Are we greedy and selfish with that which God provides for the nourishment of our spirits? Can we still embrace the generosity and peace of the Jesus way?

We begin with what may be a familiar story from Exodus, that great saga of God's deliverance of the descendants of Jacob Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Hebrews are well into their journey now. Already, they have experienced God's miraculous deliverance several times. After generations as slaves, God has used the eloquence of the formerly stuttering Moses and a series of plagues to convince Pharaoh to set the captives free. But no sooner are they well-begun on their journey back to the land promised to their ancestors than Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army after them. Trapped between the Egyptian troops and the Red Sea, the Children of Israel cry out to God and to Moses: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." But God parts the waters of the sea and the people cross over on dry land just before their pursuers are overwhelmed by the returning waters. After three days' further journey, when their supplies of water have begun to run out, the escaped slaves come to a source of water only to find it bitter and undrinkable. Again, scripture tells us, they complain but God shows Moses how to make the water sweet. After many more days and another stop at an oasis, food has begun to run short. Once again, in the words you heard a few moments ago, the people begin to complain.

It would be pretty easy to form a low opinion of the Hebrew children at this point and I've heard many sermons that do just that. But let's think this through for a moment. Remember, these escaped slaves have lived their lives having rations, no matter how meager, provided for them. They may have supplemented those rations with a little gardening. They were made to leave Egypt in a hurry, with little time to gather provisions. These are not trained survivalists, led by Bear Grylls. They don't have the equivalent of Boy Scout or Girl Scout camping badges. They

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are city folk, lost in the wilderness, traumatized by their narrow escapes to date. Can we honestly say we'd do better? Or should we have a little patience and mercy for them?

God certainly shows mercy. The word of the Lord does *not* come to Moses saying, "Tell those ingrates to tighten their belts and stop whining. Tell them to start looking for succulent plants and bugs – there's plenty to eat here if you're smart." No, God says, "I am going to rain bread all up in here. Oh, and here's some quail to roast; you can make sandwiches for the trip." God is patient with God's people, even if we are not. God's love is always faithful.

God even makes provision for them to follow a law God has not officially given them yet. The commandment to remember the Sabbath day is still three chapters and many miles away. But God's mysterious manna, which normally spoils if kept overnight, miraculously stays fresh from Friday to Saturday, so that no gathering is needed on Saturday morning. Of course, the people only learn these things after they have ignored the instructions given to them by God through Moses and both tried to keep extra manna during the week, only to have it infested with worms, and gone out to gather manna on Saturday, only to find it not there.

It's such a human thing, isn't it, not to follow instructions? Sometimes, we don't hear the instructions clearly or we don't understand them and fail to ask questions. Sometimes, failure to follow instructions comes from our own all-too-familiar brokenness. We assume that we know better – "Oh, I don't have to do it *that* way." Or we assume that the rules don't really apply to *us*. Sometimes, we think we're better than others or that we just need more than they do. We get selfish. We get greedy. We certainly see those behaviors in God's Chosen People in this story. They want just a little extra – it'll keep until tomorrow. They want to get ahead of their neighbors – we'll just go out and get some more on Saturday.

I can't hear the story of the quail blanketing the camp without thinking of a North American corollary: the passenger pigeons that used to turn the sky black with the density of their flocks. At one time, these were the most abundant birds on our continent and possibly in the world. Yet now, they are extinct, the victims of over-harvesting and outright slaughter by greedy and unthinking humans who reduced the flocks to the point that they could not survive in the way they had evolved. We nearly wiped out the American bison in a similar way and that disastrous story of greed is made worse by the fact that much of the bison slaughter was aimed at depriving the First Nations of the Plains of their staple food and the bone, leather, and horn with which they made most of their household items, including their houses. Why do we so often descend to the failure of greed? What in the world makes us think we can take and take, more than we need, more than our share, without consequence? From the animals we have driven to extinction, to the trees and plants we waste, to the minerals we rip from the ground and with which we pollute our skies and our water, we are driven by over-consumption, by greed, by selfishness.

Still, as with the Hebrew Children, God is patient with us and merciful and loving. Let's turn to the ongoing story in the sixth chapter of John to see how that continues to play out in this morning's Scriptures. Many of the people who have experienced the miraculous feeding that so closely echoed the manna from heaven have pursued Jesus back around the lake to Capernaum. Just as God is patient with the hungry and frightened Israelites, so Jesus is patient with the crowd

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who has clearly come to see if he can “do it again.” He acknowledges the very human reason for their coming but does not criticize them for it. He simply encourages them to change their focus.

Like the Israelites who couldn't follow instructions, Jesus' audience doesn't seem to understand him. As we were working through this passage together on Wednesday, one of my “lectionary buddies” paraphrased the exchange this way: “Ah, you followed me because you liked how it felt when everyone had enough. Don't worry about the lunch; concentrate on how it felt to share. You can feel like that all the time.” “How do we do that?” “Trust me.” “Why should we do that? Are you going to feed us again?” “Don't worry about the lunch.” “We want lunch!” “Oy.”

It's an over-simplification, of course. Jesus maintains his patience with the crowd. What he is trying to get them (and us) to see is that God's care for us goes far beyond the immediate gratification of our transient needs. It's closing in on lunch time here. In just a little while, we will all leave and go to our homes or restaurants and eat and be filled. But we will be hungry again come dinner time. Before we go to have lunch, bread and grape juice will be served here. But it is not to slake our physical hunger. That's not why we've come here this morning. We've come for a different kind of feeding. We've come to feel the presence of God, mediated through our customary worship, through the prayers and the hymns and the ritual of the Table, maybe even through the sermon, and through the presence of each other. We are here to satisfy our hunger for spiritual feeding.

And, just like the Children of Israel in the desert, just like that hungry crowd that followed Jesus around the lake, we can miss the point. We can fall prey to our greed. We can fail to trust God to take care of us. For this congregation, I'm actually much less worried about this last point. You have shown in the past your courage in trusting God and I'm confident that you will continue in that trust. You trusted God's provision when you chose to give away half of the land to which God, through the Washington Baptist Convention and the late Dick Ice, had led you. Had it not been for your trust in God and your resulting willingness to donate those 2.2 acres to Good Shepherd Senior Housing, Inc., it is likely that Shepherd's Garden would never have been built. Some 50 people, including our own dear Lannon Thomas, would not have their current homes, we would have never met Chris vantLeven and Sue Smith, who have become such important parts of our congregation. We would have never raised our profile in the community, not have become even more known for our hospitality. Who knows how different things would be here had you not trusted God?

We will need to continue to trust God together as we move toward fulfilling yet another part of the collective vision that was dreamed in 2003, as we prepare to balance our ministry to elders through Shepherd's Garden with a ministry to children and families through the hosting of Playful Learning Co-op Preschool. As I have mentioned previously, here and in the newsletter, we will have to make renovations to our little building. The numbers are still being calculated but it will not be cheap. Although our new partners in Playful Learning stand ready to pay their fair share, the costs to us will bite into our slender reserves. But if we are to be faithful to the vision that God gave us in all those prayerful, thoughtful sessions over a decade ago, we must trust God to sustain us even when our bank account is thin. We must remember not to focus on “lunch” but to focus on the Bread of Life.

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We can fall prey to greed even where that Bread is concerned. We can become “hoarders” of Jesus. We can say to ourselves, “All that matters is our spiritual filling. We don’t need to care for others, to be hospitable, to share the life-giving love that we have in our little community.” We can do this by closing ourselves off to making new friends. We can do this by separating ourselves from others because they do not believe as we believe or because they do not worship as we worship. We can do this by turning our backs by those in need. When we are greedy with the Bread of Life, we will find that just like manna the Bread becomes inedible, full of worms, no longer nourishing to our souls. But whenever we reach out, whenever we make friends, whenever we love as we have been loved, then we will never be spiritually hungry or thirsty. That is when the Bread of Life is manifest for us.

We pledge ourselves to this life of sharing God’s spiritual and physical gifts with us and take symbolic action of that sharing on the first Sunday of each month here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. On those mornings we say to all who enter, “Come and take this nourishment with us.” Here, we practice the open communion that recognizes that Jesus was willing to eat with anyone who would come, willing to share his life with anyone who would come, willing even to die for anyone who would come. When we break this bread, we remember that it is not ordinary bread alone that we share, not merely a powerful symbol, not some unknown bread fallen from the sky, but the substance of the life of Jesus, the good news to the poor, the release to the captives. When we raise the cup, we remember that it is not simply the crushed fruit of the vine but the joy that ran through the life of Jesus, the presence of our Loving Creator and the token of our trust in Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. We will sing together and then we will celebrate our coming together as the people of God in this place, young and old, rich and poor, new friends and old, hailing from different places and different traditions. We will celebrate the invisible union we share with all of those who trust God around the world, with all who came before us and all who came after us. We will share the Bread of Life with all who will because we are willing to be counted among those who are not hoarders, who are not greedy, but who put the needs of others ahead of our own desires. My brothers and sisters, we come together in communion and we share the Bread of Life. We will have our fill. Thanks be to God.