

16<sup>th</sup> Pentecost

September 24, 2017

## **Manna**

Spoiler alert: our readings today hold some hard lessons, but they also hold some important promises. They begin by reminding us that to complain is human, even biblical. But it is God's answer to those complaints that we are meant to hear today. The Old Testament reading takes us back into the desert with Moses and the Israelites, where the whole congregation of the people has just been led out of slavery, escaping Pharaoh's army through the parted Red Sea. After such a powerful and stunning display of God's protection, we might expect them to be filled with awe and anticipation for what God had prepared for them on the road ahead. Alas, now they are deep in the desert—a place with too much sun and not enough food or water—and a far cry from a land of milk and honey. Thirst and hunger and blistered feet would surely have contributed to their complaining—which rang with their longing for what was left behind, their fear of the present, and their failure to imagine a better future:

If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

They tried to lay their complaints at the feet of their leaders, Moses and Aaron, whose response was, "Your complaining is not against *us* but against the Lord." When the Lord heard their complaints, quail fell at their feet each night at dusk and manna appeared with each dawn. When the Israelites first saw the manna spread out over the ground like frost they said "what is it?" That is the actual translation from the Hebrew for manna—*what is it?* This new food was unfamiliar and yet somehow completely sustaining—but *only* if everyone who was able gathered just enough for each day, and the work of it, and the meal it made, was shared equally with everyone. The fear of scarcity led some to try to

hoard it—causing it to rot and stink. Only on the Sabbath, the sixth day, were they able to collect enough for that day *and* the next, keeping the Sabbath holy by resting from their journey. The Lord answered their complaints, but not exactly as they might have expected.

And then we have a story from Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus tells his disciples a strange parable about the complaints of day laborers to say something about the kingdom of heaven. This story starts out positively, too—though maybe not quite as dramatically as our Old Testament story. A landowner needs workers for his vineyard, and contracts with some day laborers to pay them an agreed-upon wage for a day’s work. It is unlikely this was much of a living wage, considering day labor was just that—day to day the workers never knew if they would get work or not, and they had no recourse if they were not paid at all. Some days they would be chosen early and were able to bring home their subsistence earnings, and some days there would be nothing. The strongest and youngest probably did better than others, but the system pitted them against each other for their equivalent of a minimum wage, which meant food in their children’s mouths. When the all-day laborers in the story were done for the day and stepped up to be paid, they expected something extra, because they had witnessed that others who were hired *hours* after them—later in the day—had already received the same wage they had agreed upon. The all-day laborers felt cheated for having worked more than others for the same reward because *they* had borne a greater burden of the day in the *scorching* heat. Did they really resent those who had only worked for an hour or two for receiving their own subsistence wage, even as deep down they knew that those who went home with empty pockets went home to hungry families? Had they forgotten what it was like to face the desperate looks of their own hungry children?

We humans seem hard-wired to compete with one another, and to take care of our own even at the expense of others. What’s mine is mine; what’s

yours is fair game if I can get hold of it; and bottom line—no matter how much there is to share, there is never enough. This perception is becoming more and more evident in our world today, as charities, community projects, local governments, public education and even churches—even this church—struggle to do more with less. Even as well-intentioned members of these enterprises we find ourselves hoarding manna, forgetting the lessons of the kingdom—the beloved community—that there is always enough when we gather and share together, and that scarcity only happens when we begin to hold some back for that rainy day, spending our energy building storehouses where the excess will rot and stink. Perhaps the fear of scarcity—and how it leads us to act towards one another—is our true Original sin.

What, then, was Jesus wanting his disciples to understand? What was God wanting the Israelites, the beloved community, to understand? What is the bread of heaven that Our Lord gives us every day and how does it sustain us? Manna as the sustaining gift of God is food that satisfies a deeper hunger—something stronger than the hunger in our bellies. Manna feeds our hunger to be loved—to be seen and known, to have our suffering recognized and our burdens shared. But more even than that, manna feeds our deeper hunger for the courage and compassion to love others—not with our leftovers, but with our first fruits—with sacrifice. Without even understanding *what is it*, we crave the bread of heaven—to give us the strength to seek our place in God’s creation—where we are called to do our day’s labor in the vineyard of God’s dream, where our reward will be sufficient—whether we are able to work all day or whether we are called to work in the last hour—and that it will be enough—not just for us—but for all whom we love in the beloved community to which we belong.

The Israelites made it to the Promised Land because the Lord was with them, because the Lord provided for them, because they had good leaders, and because they stuck together. It took them a long time—40 years—to learn the

lessons that brought them out of bondage in Egypt, and into the liberation and transformation of becoming the beloved community in the Promised Land. It took time and sacrifice and successes and failures and forgiveness and grace and hope and following and leading and manna. And it took fortitude and courage and generosity and commitment in the ongoing project of getting through the desert—commitment beyond just going along for the ride when it made them feel good and safe.

Being a community of disciples of Jesus is also more about giving than receiving, more about sacrifice than reward, more about taking up a cross than about wearing the T shirt. It is about faithfulness more than convenience; it is about showing up—offering ourselves, our time, our labor, our experience, our expertise, and yes, our money—from a place of appreciation of abundance rather than from fear of scarcity. It is about listening to our own longing to maintain a life together that is rich and transforming, and about holding and keeping our eyes open to see the dream that God holds for the beloved community.

The journey through the wilderness is never really over. Even the Promised Land has its challenges; yet the Israelites were able to grow and prosper because of the lessons they learned in getting there. They did some good things and they made some mistakes and probably still complained now and again. They made new homes, raised children, grew wheat again and made bread again, but it was the memory of the taste of manna in the desert that sustained them and held them together as the beloved community.

The beloved community of St. Anne's will not be exempt from challenges as it makes a way through its own wilderness—following Jesus, making disciples, worshiping and serving and welcoming and loving one another. The fear of scarcity will surely lead to some complaining from time to time. Yet challenge can be a holy thing—when it leads to taking stock, resetting course,

discerning and reaffirming the vision of God's call to an even deeper courage, deeper compassion, greater sacrifice and greater service for each other and for the world outside the red doors. The journey is long and the lessons are hard, but there is manna waiting to be shared every new day. And when the manna is fully shared in God's beloved community, there will always be enough. AMEN