

Pentecost 15, Proper 20
Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16

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The People of God had been blessed like no other people before them: they had been freed from bondage in Egypt. The People of God also faced a serious problem: they had been freed from bondage in Egypt. Their freedom came with trials and struggles which they couldn't have anticipated as they witnessed the power of God parting the waters of the Red Sea and leading them to freedom on the other side. On the far side of the Red Sea, as the prophet Miriam led them in their dancing and praising and worship in their newfound freedom, the people were not thinking about what the journey they were beginning would bring them. They were blessed with safety and freedom, and followed the pillar of cloud into the wilderness with happy hearts. One month later, after a few weeks of marching through the hot desert, the provisions they had carried out with them were gone and fear began to spread that they would starve to death. They had stopped feeling blessed and felt cursed in their new struggle.

They had forgotten about all that had happened in Egypt and could only remember the "flesh pots" with plenty of juicy meat roasting away – I am sure that the memory of that meat in Egypt got sweeter and tenderer and the portions grew larger with each passing day as they trudged further into the wilderness. In their struggle, the people even forgot what God had done, His glory that he revealed to the world in Egypt.

The threat of hunger was real to the people as they got deeper into the wilderness – and they fell into complaining rather than praying and trusting. What would the story have been like had they put Miriam up front to lead them in dancing and praising and worship once again or if Aaron and Moses had gotten pro-active and led some prayers to ask God to act and bless them again? Perhaps it would have been a different story. But the story that has been passed down for thousands of years is that things were not perfect, freedom was a blessing but came with struggle. In their distress, the people complained and forgot who God was. Consumed by their worry they did not remember to trust God and to feel at peace with the knowledge that he had kept his promises and led them across the Red Sea with dry feet to freedom – why didn't they give thanks for all God had done and ask him to continue to bless them? Why were they not satisfied before the manna came?

We see this same theme of our human propensity to dis-satisfaction in the Gospel reading. Jesus presented his disciples with a parable about heaven. A landowner, a fair and generous employer, hires some workers to bring in his harvest. The workers have been given a blessing of a good day of work and the full wages they expected. But when the others who are brought into work the same field much later in the day get the same deal of "the usual daily wage," there is complaining. The early workers feel slighted because the late-arrivals received the same generosity of the landowner. The early-comers do not feel satisfied with their blessing of good pay for good work when they see others receiving the same blessing from a generous Lord.

Why do the early arrivers not feel their blessing? Although they received what was due them and they had been happy to agree to that good pay, the "usual wage" for a day's work, they are not satisfied with what others had received. They are angered by the landowner's generosity.

It seems to be a human condition that we are prone to feeling less than satisfied with what we have. We tend to always want more. We accumulate and buy more and hoard and consume. What is going on with us? I think the memory of the manna and quails in Exodus and Jesus' parable about the workers were each getting at a truth about humanity that holds even today: we are a forgetful bunch. We forget that God has blessed us, that He provides, and that because of God's goodness and mercy, there is plenty for all.

I received an e-mail over the summer from one of my clergy colleagues over at St. Paul's, Old Town about a new coalition that was being formed. Churches, Synagogues and non-profits with feeding programs in the City of Alexandria were going to respond together to the "Food Insecurity" or situation in our region. The report was written by The Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria and is entitled 'Toward an End to Hunger in Alexandria.' The report states, "The bottom line is that thousands of Alexandrians, perhaps as many as one in five, live in households struggling to make ends meet. Unfortunately, when it comes to deciding what bills to pay, some of these families are forced to reduce what they spend on food. This, in turn, increases the probability that the household is food insecure, bringing with it the risk of negative health and developmental outcomes."¹

A press release highlighting the release of the report quotes Tricia Rodgers, Chair of the Alexandria alliance against childhood obesity, who said, "Food hardship isn't something that Alexandrians of any age should experience. We hope this report will be a catalyst for conversations about how we as a community can ensure that everyone who lives in the city has access to healthy, nutritious food"... Additionally, the report found a need for greater collaboration among all elements of the community-food providers, local government, and regional organizations."² The issue is not scarcity in our region – we have plenty of food, really good and nutritious food, in the City of Alexandria. We are a wealthy and extremely blessed community. The issue is figuring out the best way to get the food into every household each and every day – that those of us who have plenty and who have gleaned the excess can find a way to better work together to share the bounty. Grace Church has heeded the call of this report for food assistance programs to work together and we have joined with other parishes in the coalition "End Hunger in Alexandria."

Today, September 21st is the Sunday that the City government has asked that Parish leaders spread the word about the issue of food insecurity in our neighborhoods and to get the word out that we have the resources to ensure we all can eat healthy meals each

¹ *Partnership's Childhood Obesity Action Network Releases Report on Efforts to Address Food Hardship in Alexandria* Press Release, Allen Lomax, July 15, 2014.

² *Ibid.*

day. God has blessed us and we, in turn, as thanksgiving, are called to bless our community. But we are a forgetful people – how do we continue to remember our blessing, to feel satisfied so that we can continually turn our blessing into a blessing for our community?

In Exodus when the people forgot everything because of the struggle of the wilderness, God heard their complaints. The LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” God tested the Israelites with his blessing of Manna and quails. He sent them a miracle of precise quantity: God provided them enough for each day. God provided enough for them to even take a Sabbath day.³ That seventh day, there was enough left over so they could rest. This miracle was meant to test obedience and faith of the people.

⁴ What would they do with this gift? God provided just what they needed and more. God wanted to teach His people that they need to understand that it was He who brought them out of Egypt, it is He alone who can and will provide for them.⁵ Would they be satisfied and remember Him? Well, yes and no – the story does go on from this part, one month into the wilderness. Over the next 38 years and eleven months there will be golden calves and Baal and Ten Commandments and Covenant and a tabernacle to come in the Exodus story. But God did not give up on them. He continued to provide for His people throughout their time in the wilderness; all the while teaching them to feel blessed and satisfied to be His People. Jesus taught his generation that the kingdom of heaven is ruled by the same generous god. The Lord is like the kind of landowner who pays all the same daily wage – can we feel happy for the ones who came late to the field? The landowner in the parable asks us, “are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” I think Jesus called his disciples to be the kind of workers who see a friend who has nearly missed the work day, to wipe the sweat from their brows as they greet him from their hard-harvested row and say, “Hurry, Friend! You’ve made it with a few minutes to spare! Pick up your plow and see what you can do before the whistle blows! You’re going to get a full day’s wage too and your family will eat well tonight!” Praise God!

A disciple of Jesus should feel completely satisfied: such a one has been forgiven, made whole, healed, blessed, and sanctified. What could satisfy more than knowing oneself to be loved by God? That you will inherit the Kingdom? That sin and death have no power over you? There is plenty because God is generous: Invite your neighbor to come to the field late!

But that brings us back to my question: we are a forgetful people – how do we continue to remember our blessing, to feel satisfied so that we can continually turn our blessing into a blessing for our community? I think the answer is in the Sabbath. We gather together each Sunday to worship together. Fr. Malm has been like the prophet Miriam, leading the congregation for twenty-five years now in praising God in this weekly worship and remembrance the story of all the Lord has done for us. As in the Exodus story, God has showered his people, us, with manna and quails. God has sent us a miracle of precise quantity: we have enough for all to eat. God continues to challenge us to see if we will do what He asks of us. For the Israelites it was to collect the manna and quails, just enough for each day and then that extra on the sixth day so they could have a rest on the seventh day. Would they be satisfied and remember God? For Jesus’ disciples the question was essentially the same: can you feel your blessing and praise God for his generosity to all? Will you remember the Lord your God and feel satisfied?

This past week I took a turn with the Brown Bag Lunch program. Several times each year, Grace Church signs up to prepare a week’s worth of lunches distributed at Mead Memorial Episcopal Church in Old Town. I worked alongside Lucy-Lee Reed, and she showed me the system that has developed over the years to get the food ready quickly and distributed efficiently. I opened up the freezer in the kitchen upstairs and it was full of individually wrapped turkey and cheese sandwiches people had donated. We set about preparing the 70 bags required for the day with sandwiches, fruit, chips, and a granola bar in each. While we were at Meade Memorial Church, we had around sixty people come to eat lunch. Most were men. Some were obviously struggling with mental illness. Some were laborers who were glad of a free meal – maybe their wages were then freed up to go toward housing or to the next meal at home. I am sure each person has a story of what brings them to that little church for the free lunch. There is community there – perhaps the warm welcome, the “how are you doing today, Sam?” is even more important than the sandwich.

I thought of the trajectory of that sandwich that blessed the hands of Sam with nutrition and with community – from Sally reaching for the cheese and turkey in the deli aisle at Safeway and then into a sandwich on her kitchen counter; to Lucy-Lee’s hands in the Grace kitchen and into its brown bag; into Sam’s belly with a blessing from the people of Grace Church. We do this every day, touching the lives of men, women, and children in our community through the Brown Bag Lunch program, the Food Pantry, the Carpenter’s Shelter dinners, the Thanksgiving Baskets, the Christmas gift cards, and the clergy Discretionary Funds.

We are gathered this day, the Sabbath we keep, to worship this Lord who provides with generous abundance. We are full with quail and manna. We have been in the vineyard working, and it is time to feel satisfied with our wages. We will remember together in our worship that the Lord provides and is generous. Feel His blessing and be satisfied! When we remember God in this way, reminding one another of all we have, we are empowered to do the many ministries we do to share the abundance with our neighbors.

Amen.

³ Walter Houston in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Barton and Muddiman, eds., Oxford University Press: 2000, p. 78.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.