

Manna for All

Exodus 16: 1-3 and 13-18

Matthew 4: 1-11

November 10, 2013

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I. Introduction

We are starting off this week talking for a couple of weeks about the whole process of stewardship. And for those of you who haven't been through this process with us before, and we have a lot of new folks this year, I want to start off by saying that this is not a process of just fundraising for the church budget. You'll never hear me, for example, in these couple of weeks say, "If you just give early, we can cut pledge week by a whole day." That's not happening.

There is a budget piece to this certainly because this is where we raise the funds that support all of the amazing ministries in which we are engaged. But the sort of implicit message there is that stewardship is sort of an unfortunate necessity and that's not what we are about here at Metropolitan. Because at its core, in fact, it's not what we should be about in any of our churches, because at its core, what stewardship is about is about deepening discipleship. Stewardship is the place where we make concrete the things that we say we believe. It's where we get a chance to model what it is to live out of grace and to live with generosity. It's where trust becomes real.

Last year, you may recall we were blessed to have Bishop Joe Yeakel preach from our pulpit talking about the whole reconciling issue. Bishop Joe Yeakel was the bishop who ordained me a hundred years ago and he used to say, "Don't tell me what you believe, show me your checkbook and I'll tell you what you believe." Because a

checkbook is a theological statement, it's about what we prioritize, what we value, where we put our trust. So, I want to encourage you to not skip out on the couple weeks that we're focusing on stewardship as we often do when NPR pledge week comes by and we start looking for other radio stations while we're traveling. Because arguably, these weeks, this discussion is one of the most fundamental and important we will have as a community over the course of this year.

II. Forming a New People

We spent a lot of time this year reflecting on where we have grown as a community and who we are being called to be as a community of faith. We've talked a lot about the broadening sense of who we are as a community of faith. We've talked about this really important and wondrous process of taking three different congregations and melding them into one church family. We've talked a lot about how we have deepened our areas of ministry partnerships through the Community Council for the Homeless and our shelter programs and through all of the important partners of our Campus Kitchen Project and all of the places that we have drawn together a broader network of people engaged in our work. We have been greatly blessed with the way which our partnership with American University has blossomed over the last couple of years and with our new partnership with Brighter Day in southeast, so there are lots of ways in which we are redefining who we are as a church community.

Our true theme through these couple weeks of stewardship is this whole image of manna, and we chose this because manna is the tool that God uses with the newly emerging children of Israel. Manna is the tool that God uses to help them understand what they are about at a very fundamental level. Of course, this takes place at a point

in the story when the Israelites have just been freed from slavery in Egypt and they have been in Egypt for several hundred years and have become part of a system that is highly dysfunctional. Even if they are the ones who have suffered at the hands of the system, it's still the system that they know and operate out of. Manna is God's tool for shaping who they will be and who they need to be as they prepare to enter the Promised Land.

In Egypt, they were subject to power that was deeply coercive and they were part of an economic system in which resources were hoarded by a few while others went hungry. It was a system in which executive compensation had gone through the roof but full-time workers couldn't support their families. It was a system in which when there were constraints on the budget, the national leaders immediately started looking at food stamp programs to cut.

God wants to prepare the children of Israel for a new sort of life, a different sort of community, a community in which power was shared and built collaboratively, in which resources were shared and everyone had what they needed. And the Israelites wrestled with this, and so this whole story of manna that we will be unpacking the next couple of weeks is the story of Israelites trying to get their head around a new way of being and they fail over and over again. So, Moses tells them the manna is coming every morning, this is all you need to get. The first thing they do is, "Wow, look at all the manna. Let's get as much as we can." And of course, it all spoils by the next day, but we'll get to some of that story next week.

What I wanted to start us off today, though, is understanding what a profoundly counter-cultural idea manna was. This idea that resources were given as a gift from

God and to be shared so that everybody had enough, and that we could trust in the provider of those resources. We didn't need to hoard for our own security. There's lots and lots of material in this wonderful story of Jesus and the desert to unpack, the thing I want to just highlight in this regard this morning, is how Matthew starts his entire gospel by trying to make very clear that the kingdom of God that Jesus is ushering in is totally different from the value system of the world around him. That the Kingdom of God stands in sharp opposition to the values of the world so that as Satan offers Jesus all the things that we long for, the resources we need, public acclaim, power, Jesus reminds Satan and reminds us that all of those values get turned on their head when we encounter the living God and that once we have the relationship with God in order, everything else flows with life-giving power from that.

This conflict that Matthew draws runs through the course of his gospel until at the very end when it appears as though the values of this world had triumphed ultimately, God again sets it on its head through the power of the resurrection, and demonstrates how the sovereignty and love of God triumph over all of the things that we think that are going to give us security and life. So, manna then is a metaphor, obviously for food, but also for the resources that we need to live rich and full lives and therefore is the powerful metaphor for what the stewardship process is about.

III. Lessons from Manna: how Manna helps us understand healthy stewardship.

There's a wonderful first century rabbi by the name of Simeon ben Yochai who was the source of the Jewish text that we now call the Zohar. He lived just a little bit after Jesus, after the destruction of the temple, and his disciples came to him one day and said, "Rabbi, why is it that God had to give the manna to Israelites every day? Why

didn't he just give them a year's worth of manna so they wouldn't have to worry about it? They'd have a year's worth of supply with them."

The rabbi thought for a minute, he said, "There was a king who had a son, and every year the king gave his son the sustenance he needed, the little piece of his inheritance for the year, but he started to notice that the only time he saw his son was once a year and so he started giving the son his inheritance day by day and he noticed that he got to see his son every single day." Likewise, the rabbi says, "The children of Israel, because manna was coming down daily, were reminded to direct their hearts to the God in heaven every single day."

See, when we focus on accumulating and place our confidence in this stuff that we have accumulated, it's very easy to let God take a backseat. We angst in a great deal of America about the decline in mainline religion and the fact that religion is virtually dead in many areas of Europe and we, I think, often wonder if that has to do with our growing intellectual sophistication. I want to suggest that it doesn't have anything to do with that at all. It has to do with our affluence, and the fact that because we believe we are in control of our destinies and we have accumulated enough to get by, that God is no longer necessary.

Healthy stewardship, which always requires sacrifice, keeps us mindful of our dependence on God, keeps us mindful that everything that we have is a gift from an abundant and gracious God and keeps us mindful of the fact that if we are to allow God to move in our lives, we need to share the gifts that God has shared with us so that everyone has enough. Healthy stewardship reminds us that in the words of Christ there is one thing needful and everything else flows from that.

Rabbi Simeon then said to his disciples, “Another reason that God gave the manna every day,” and I love this line, “is because God wanted us to eat the bread while it was still warm.” I love that image. We’re perfectly happy to collect all the bread we can and eat stale bread if we have to because now we know it’s there, but God wants us to enjoy every gift that we are given and not live in some planned future that we are preparing for but to live in the moment in which we find ourselves with the gift with which we find ourselves.

There is a wonderful scene in *The Empire Strikes Back*, where Yoda is teaching Luke Skywalker what it’s like what he needs to be about to be a Jedi, and he’s in dialogue with Obi Wan Kenobi and he says about Luke, he says, “This one I have watched for a long time,” I’m going to spare you my Yoda invitation, “And all his life he has looked away to the future, to the horizon, never his mind on where he was.”

We spent a lot of time over the last year or two looking at this whole issue of mindfulness. How do we live in the present moment in which God has given us? How are we aware of God’s presence in that moment? So, Rabbi Simeon reminds us that the manna was God’s tool for keeping us in the moment because God wants us to eat the bread while it’s warm.

Still another reason, Rabbi Simeon says for daily manna, is to lighten the burden that has to be carried during the journey. We have been blessed by hearing Drema reflect on her pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago and Pat House, as many of you know, just returned from her pilgrimage on the Camino and both of them talk with great eloquence of the process of shedding their stuff that happened on that journey. They both knew that going into it, they had to pack very, very, lightly because when you’re

walking 500 miles day after day, you can't carry that much stuff but both of them had talked about the fact that even as little as they carried, was too much. So their process on the Camino was the process of letting go of all of the things they were carrying that they thought they needed but they didn't really need and in that process, living a life that was greater and greater and more expansive with every step of the journey.

Giving the children of Israel daily manna is a way of giving us the freedom to let go of all of the things we are clinging to so desperately because we think we need them and the reminder that all we need is God and that once we've got the piece in place, all of the rest of it, flows with great joy and great security. Stewardship is the process of letting go of the things that we think we need so that we can open ourselves to the one thing we do need. It is the process of making sure that the things we own don't own us and in that journey, finding our souls free to encounter God and one another in new and life-giving ways.

IV. Conclusion

We live in Egypt. We live in a place where resources are hoarded, and desperately needed. We live in a place where power is coercive and we desperately need a different model for what leadership looks like. Our time together, as we reflect on stewardship, is the time in which we can bring some focus to how we start to build the kingdom of God in the midst of that place. It's where we start living a little bit out of the Promised Land, even at the same time that the world around us is often modeling a different set of values. Stewardship is on a very fundamental level, about what it means, what it really means, not just what we say it means or think it means or even

think what we believe it means, stewardship is about what it really means to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Amen.