

Freedom from Worry

Exodus 16: 22-34

Matthew 6: 25-34

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I. Introduction

As many of you are aware, this past Tuesday was the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's delivery of the Gettysburg Address. And in last Sunday's post there was a wonderful piece by the President of Harvard talking about how Lincoln used that amazing 10-sentence speech to reframe for the Union what the Civil War was about and to give them a sense of greater purpose as they engaged in this conflict and motivation for the sacrifice that that was going to entail.

Today, we come to the close of our Stewardship series, and as we have talked, stewardship is also in a small way about discerning how we go about sacrificing to build a new sort of community. We have throughout this series used this image of manna to talk about or as an analogy for what stewardship is about because manna was the tool that God used to shape the Israelite community into the new people of God that were being called into being in the desert. Manna was both a way for God to meet the needs of the people, but also to start to help them understand who they were in a different way.

For 400 years, the Israelites had been slaves and Egypt had absorbed what we have talked about as an economy of scarcity, where because of the vast inequities in the way resources were distributed, the people at the bottom of the social ladder had to scramble for their very sustenance and that of course, breeds a sense of anxiety

and desperateness that causes people to cling, to hold on hard to what they have and to hoard against a time when they might not have anything. And as opposed to that, God in this gift of manna starts to model an economy of abundance where if we are all working together and sharing what we have with one another, everyone has enough to eat. It's a process of letting go of the need to accumulate and living into the trust in God's grace and providence.

II. Manna in a Jar

So, today we end the manna story, and we have the Israelites entering into the Promise Land, and the writer of Exodus tells us that God provided manna for the people for 40 years, and then, as they entered into the Promise Land, the manna stopped and the people had to start providing for their own food. But they had to keep a jar of manna throughout their history as a sign, as a remembrance of the promise of God to provide for the community and as a call to continue to be the kind of community that they learned how to be when they were gathering the manna in the desert.

The Israelites, as they entered the Promise Land, were actually in a situation much more akin to us now than when they were in the desert since we are all now needing to provide our own food. It's not that God has stopped providing gifts, because, of course, everything that we used to get our sustenance is a gift from God. But unlike the manna that had to be gathered, it just sort of appeared on the ground and then was gathered in by the community, the gifts that we have to use now produce the food that we eat. So, it puts us at a one step removed from this immediate sense of God's gracious providing that was in the manna. The jar of manna was for the Israelites a tool to remember that time of intimacy with God in the desert where their

needs were provided for in the moment and to remember the kind of community that God was calling them to be.

Last week, we talked a little bit about the fact that our need to accumulate is at its root a sign of our great anxiety. And this wonderful passage that we heard this morning has Jesus addressing that anxiety very directly, “Do not worry,” He says, “about what you’re going to eat and what you’re going to wear. God is going to provide them. Set your mind on the things that are important.” Jesus’ words there are not permission to not plan, they’re not permission to not work, because our ability to plan and our ability to work are themselves gifts from God, but it is a call to not let our anxiety about the world drive our decisions. It’s about not letting our worry about where our meals are coming from decide how we go about making decisions in our life. Because God has given us all the gifts that we need to get the food and clothing that we require.

III. Building a New Community.

When Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, he was speaking to a nation that was also in great anxiety, a nation that had been torn by war and that he knew was going to experience war for some indeterminate period in the future, and he needed to address that weariness and that anxiety in these lines. And in the face of that, he invites them metaphorically to remember the manna, remember who they were called and created to be, and how that call sometimes requires from us sacrifice. He knew that when we set aside our fears and our self-centeredness, we become the best of who we are.

We don't have many leaders today who call us to be our best. Our politicians have figured out that they don't get elected by inviting us to make sacrifices, right? Not only do they not encourage us often to move beyond our anxiety, they actually often play on our anxiety as they seek to be elected. And they help us to rationalize our selfishness and our greed rather than calling us to put the needs of the community first.

Sadly, I want to say, the leaders of our church often do the same thing, and it has been a source of great disappointment to me that our Bishops who often in private conversation will be very supportive of marriage equality have a very hard time challenging our church to move beyond where we are. They too don't get elected by taking a strong stance. They get elected by making the greatest number of people happy and comfortable. Very occasionally, we are blessed with a leader like Abraham Lincoln who invites us to be our very best selves, to just step beyond our fear to sacrifice for a greater good, to create a different sort of community.

John F. Kennedy, whose assassination we remembered 50 years ago this week, was another one of those leaders who invited us to step out from our fear and self-interest into a bigger sort of world. There are leaders who show us the jar of manna and help us to see how we can shape a new community. Our stewardship is one of the ways that we sacrifice to build a new community. It is about starting to create a little example of what the kingdom of God is supposed to look like. It's about building a place where people who are homeless have a roof over their heads and where people who are hungry have enough food to eat. It's about building a place where our fragile elderly are cared for and our vulnerable children are nurtured. It's a

place in which everyone experiences the radical hospitality of the Holy Spirit regardless of what they look like or who they choose to love.

So, I want to invite you this morning to reflect on what a sacrifice looks like for you as we build this community together. There's not a right answer to that question because we're all at different places on this journey. But I want to offer the advice of C.S. Lewis who coincidentally also died the same day that John F. Kennedy was killed, so we commemorate the 50th anniversary of his death this week also. And C.S. Lewis said about stewardship, "I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. If our charities do not pinch or hamper us, they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot because our charitable expenditure excludes them."

I like that image. There are things we would want to do and cannot because of the other ways that we use our money to build a new sort of community. Today is about inviting your participation in that process.

For Jeannine and I, the right amount has been a tithe on our combined salaries and housing allowance which we divide up, as many of you do, so that \$12,000 of that will come to Metropolitan and the rest will go to Bread for the City and other causes that we support. I don't know what the right amount is for you but I want to encourage you to think about what does it look like to stretch a little bit, to move to that place that C.S. Lewis encourages us where it feels like just a little bit more than we can spare? What is that place for you?

And I want to invite you, members of the family -- if you're a visitor, you can tune out for a moment -- but I want to invite all of you, members of the family, to take this card that's in your bulletin and to fill that out, because this is the discipline that we bring to the spiritual discipline of giving.

IV. Conclusion

In the Civil War, the leaders of the Confederacy knew that they couldn't defeat the North. The North had too much industrial power and had too many people, they knew they couldn't win that war. But they conducted their strategy in such a way as to wear the North down in the idea that they would eventually get tired enough of fighting, that they would just let them go their way, that they would let apathy win the day.

In all of the battles in which we are engaged as a Metropolitan community to create a different sort of world, all of those battles are winnable. So, whether it's keeping up pressure on the city to develop affordable housing at Parkway Overlook or whether it's keeping up the pressure on our denomination to be truly hospitable to our GLBT sisters and brothers, those battles are all winnable. We lose them when we lose the will to create a different kind of world, when we let our apathy and our fear cause us to withdraw. Stewardship is about our commitment to continuing those fights, to continuing to create a different sort of community, to work with the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about the kingdom of God. And dear friends, that's our battle to lose.

Amen.