

Our Daily Bread

Exodus 16:1-18

October 3, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

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This is a family story that I learned from my grandfather, and when I tell it, I can sometimes hear a little extra dose of Texas creeping into my voice, because the story belonged to him. He said that his cousin Edna Mae and her husband Al had six children. Everyone was poor in those days. It was the Great Depression, after all. But Edna Mae's family was poorer than most, because her husband Al was injured and unable to work. They lived on a farm and usually eked out a living with every able body, regardless of age, lending a hand – planting in the spring, cultivating in the summer, canning in the fall, eating what they had canned all winterlong. But six children eat a lot, and eventually the root cellar was absolutely empty. There was nothing to eat, and no money to buy any food.

So that day, Edna Mae got up early and did the only thing she knew how to do: she prayed. She said, "God, I've got these six precious children to feed, and no food to give them. They are hungry, and I can hardly look them in the face. Lord, just give me some bread to feed these kids. Just give me some bread for these children, Lord."

With tears in her eyes, she got up and went about her morning chores. Still, no food in the house.

But about an hour later, a neighbor came running up her driveway to tell her that the local bread delivery truck had overturned right in front of her house. There were loaves and loaves of hot, fresh bread lying in the road, all plenty good for her hungry children to eat, and none of them could be sold to the original customers. The driver was asking all the neighbors to take whatever they wanted.

Edna Mae laughed. "How little faith we have," she said. "I asked God for bread. If I had really had faith, I would have asked for a side of beef, too!"

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Our scripture text today is about exactly this kind of faith. It's the story of manna in the wilderness. I know you have heard this story before, but I will tell it again to remind us all of the details.

The Israelites have left slavery in Egypt, following Moses to the Promised Land. But to get there they have to cross a wide desert, and apparently Moses forgot the map, because they wander around for years – thousands of people out in the dry wilderness, wandering nomadically. They aren't in one place long enough to grow their own food, even if the land around them would have supported agriculture, and they couldn't carry enough with them from Egypt to sustain them on such a long journey. Their flight from slavery to freedom across this arid land forces them to rely on God alone, and that's the whole point of this scripture story.

They grumble at first. "Why did you take us from Egypt?" they ask God melodramatically. "We may have been slaves there, but at least we had enough to eat, all the bread we wanted and plenty of meat, and it tasted good, too! Out here we might as well be dead!"

God hears their complaining and tells Moses to let the people know that God will send just enough each day to feed the people for that one day. Every day, when they gather the food God sends, they will realize that this day and this whole journey are in God's hand.

So, suddenly, every evening quail begin to land around them, and they cover the camp, plenty for everyone to eat for that night. And, every morning something they have never seen before appears on the ground.

The Israelites know what to do with quail – kill them, roast them up, and have a feast. But this stuff on the ground is something else. They don't even know what it is. In fact, the word "manna" means something like "What the heck is THAT stuff?"

I looked it up, actually. Manna is, “a honey-like excretion from certain insects which infest tamarisk trees. When it drops from the leaves it becomes almost solid, but in the heat of the day it melts, so it must be collected in the morning.” So, for all intents and purposes, in the morning, manna is like a sweet bread. Quail every evening, donuts every morning, and just enough of each for one day. Every day. Except on the day before the Sabbath, when suddenly twice as much appears, so the people won’t have to work on the Sabbath day, gathering the food in.

Time and again, when the people of Israel have their backs against the wall, they find that what they truly need just appears for them. And this type of gift is not limited to biblical times. “Just give me some bread to feed these children, Lord,” Edna Mae prayed. And bread appeared. Has something like this ever happened in your own life? It has in mine, many times.

We are a lot like the people of Israel. Like them, we have to rely on God alone in our journey through life, even if we have the illusion that we can rely on ourselves. And as God did for them, God sends us what we truly need when we need it.

This is stewardship season, the time when we consider prayerfully our gifts to the church for the coming year. I think often, we are afraid to give – or at least afraid to pledge our gifts – because we are truly worried that we won’t have enough. We operate from a spiritual place of scarcity. If we fear we won’t have enough, we hold more tightly to what we have. The Israelites did that in the wilderness, and the extra manna they gathered rotted in their hands. But when they came to trust in the abundance that God showered on them every single day, they stopped gathering more than they needed just then. They lived in the true and certain knowledge of God’s providence. Their faith was always rewarded.

For the past several weeks we have studied Bible stories that tell us of God’s great gifts in our lives. We began with Creation. Look around us! God’s first great gift and our delight. Then we heard the story of Jacob, receiving a blessing and a future when it looked like there was no future for him at all. God has a future for us as well. Last week we heard the story of Moses, and God’s promise to give us leaders when we need them most. And today, the story of manna in the wilderness. Give us this day our daily bread. Lord, just give me some bread to feed these hungry children. We have so much to be grateful for!

When we make a pledge for the coming year, we are making a statement of faith – faith that there will be enough for us every single day, and faith that God will continue to provide for us throughout the year. Just look at all the times that God has been present in our lives, and has provided what we truly needed. That faith should be easy for us to find in our hearts. Give us this day our daily bread. We only need bread for one day at a time. Tomorrow’s bread will be there when we need it.

Now, I have to tell you that this church has a pretty good record of giving, but – compared to other churches I have known over the years – we don’t have a good record of pledging. Not at all.

Some of us, who give throughout the year, have traditionally not completed pledge cards. Some of us have turned in our pledges very late, long after the budget has been set, or even after the new budget year has begun. This makes setting our church budget for the coming year a little like throwing darts at a dart board. It is enough to make treasurers and trustees a little twitchy.

We have to have a plan for how we will operate in the coming year, and to create that, we need to know what all of us believe in faith that we will be able to give.

We will dedicate our pledges on October 24, just three weeks from now. So, let us set a goal together, not only to increase our own giving for the coming year if we can, but also to increase the NUMBER of pledges, so that our treasurer and trustees can make good and prudent decisions on our behalf. Let’s all get our pledge cards in on time.

We live in God’s grace every single day, in good times and in bad. Our journey is in God’s hand. We don’t need to be afraid. We can afford to be open-hearted and open-handed and to trust in God for our future. For it is out of gratitude to God that we give and serve.

Amen