Exodus 16:1-16 + John 6:24-35

Take and Eat

The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time August 5, 2018

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Do you suppose there is some link from the congregation of Israel traveling through the wilderness to all people everywhere, at all times? Why? Well, what traveling family, in all of history, hasn’t heard from the back seat of the wagon “are we there yet?” Or from the front “honey, do you think maybe we are lost?” Or, again, from the back, “whose idea was this trip, anyway? Maybe we should turn around now before it’s too late.” And so on and so on, until finally from the front, “Maybe I could strangle you and leave you out here in the middle of nowhere. Who would know?” And as an ominous silence descends, “just kidding.” (For the record, the peoples’ complaints actually turned to paranoid accusations that Moses and Aaron has brought them on this spiritual jaunt through the wilderness only to kill them. **Now that’s a congregational meltdown.**

**All joking aside,** the issue in the wilderness is the relationship between food and faith. The resolution is not starvation. God provides abundantly so that the people may know God and trust in God’s faithful provisions for their needs. The resolution points the people away from themselves toward God, whose intentions are always for good.

The biblical scholar Terrance Frietham says:

“How common it is among the people of God that a crisis, whether a crisis of daily need or physical suffering, occasions a crisis of faith. Material and spiritual well-being are more closely linked than we often care to admit. Israel’s situation is not unlike a community of faith whose understanding of “act of God” has largely been determined by their insurance policies. The connections of God with daily affairs has, for all practical purposes, disappeared.”

Yet, isn’t this precisely the connection revealed in this story? At their moments of greatest need, God has provided for them - deliverance from slavery, water in the wilderness. Creation itself, the source of abundance, is the gift of God’s goodness. In the ordinariness of daily bread, God’s blessing is revealed. As they travel through the wilderness the link that is being established is the relationship between their daily needs and faith in God. Manna from heaven is just that: bread from God, the very name given to Jesus Christ. Frietham comments:

 “God is concerned about all the little things that make up their daily rounds. God is one who cares for them in such a way as to respond to their needs for daily bread. The people of God can’t live by bread alone, but they cannot live without bread either.”

Fresh from his own time in the wilderness, Jesus calls his followers to pray: give us this day our daily bread. Just for today Lord just for today.

In the Exodus story, the wilderness is a place testing for the people of God. Will they be a people who depend fully upon God to provide for their needs and lead them into the future? Will they be responsible with the gifts of God – neither hording nor hiding – but receiving and sharing, them with faith and gratitude one day at a time?

The wilderness runs right through our hearts. Will I be a person of faith, depending upon the abundant provisions of God, even in time of crisis? The question is not how God provides. The question is whether I will live with faith – not fear – trusting that God is gracious and merciful and will provide manna for the moment.

Nothing about this is particularly easy. It’s especially difficult when there is so much ambient noise in our lives and in our world. Some is just plain noise of our own devices and designs, other is the noise of a world in desparate pain. The cries of the suffering children and their parents along with the screeching rants of those trying to stop those cries or distract us with their own silly solutions.

***There is voice that I yearn to hear while listening to this multi-layered story of the world’s pain.*** It is the voice of Jesus. Sometimes I wish I could hear him speaking more clearly in the raucous rhetoric that passes for dialogue these days. Some days I doubt that is possible, other days I’m more hopeful. On those days, when I am listening underneath the fear and anger and confusion of my life, however distant and faint it may be at times, I hear him saying “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Curiously, he does not say I give you the bread or I know where you can find it, if you follow me. Instead, he offers his own life as the very food that will satisfy the hunger that no ordinary bread can ever fill. And his life is given is for everyone, freely offered for anyone to accept. It is his life given freely and generously that points to the wide embrace of God’s love for all the world’s suffering people. I have a woodcut in my office that features children of all nationalities seated around a table with bread on it. It is called the bread of life and underneath is the caption, many children dwell in my Father’s House.

This is Jesus’ voice that I yearn to hear, and not for myself alone or for the church alone and those who belong to it, but for this whole broken world, because I believe it is all people of the world that Jesus intended to hear his offer.

Mary Karr, a poet and the author of The Liar’s Club, describes the offer of Jesus this way, “you are loved. Take that and eat it.”

Many years ago, but still vivid in the memory of my heart, I served communion once a month while visiting prisoners in the largest Federal prison for women in this country. As they came forward, one woman whose heavily lined face showed the pain of her life stood before me, with her sad eyes appealing to me. When I said, “this is the bread of life”, tears came down her face. She whispered to me, “I hope so. I hope so.” It was all she could manage to whisper. All I could do was offer the bread. It is enough only to receive.

You are loved. Take and eat it.

Now to the One who is able to do far more abundantly that you can ask, or even imagine, to the One God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.