

April 29, 2018

The Manna Principle of Possessions

Exodus 16:11-30

Call to Worship (Proverbs 30:7-9):

Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me before I die.

Remove far from me falsehood and lying.

Give me neither poverty nor riches;

Feed me with the food I need.

Or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the Lord?"

Or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God

After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, bringing them across the Sea of Reeds, the people still had needs. Most notably, they were in a desert without food. So they complained to Moses, saying, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." We read the Lord's response in Exodus 16:11-30:

¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." '

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, 'It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶This is what the Lord has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents." ' ¹⁷The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹And Moses said to them, 'Let no one leave any of it over until morning. ' ²⁰But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

²²On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³he said to them, 'This is what the Lord has commanded: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning." ' ²⁴So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. ²⁵Moses said, 'Eat it today, for today is a

sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.'

²⁷On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none.

²⁸The Lord said to Moses, 'How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? ²⁹See! The Lord has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.'³⁰So the people rested on the seventh day.

We're spending a couple of months in the Exodus, the story about Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt that is told in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Why does it take four whole books to tell this story, you might wonder? Well, if you've ever tried to read those books through, you know why. Because the story itself is only a small part of what's in there. Those books consist mostly of census data, sacrificial inventories, assembly instructions, and laws. Not even always particularly useful laws. Half the book of Exodus consists of the laws for the construction and assembly of the tabernacle – a portable tent-shrine that no longer exists. So, not useful. And then we have this chapter we just read of detailed instructions on the care and keeping of manna, the miraculous food that the Israelites ate in the desert and that we have none of today. This is helpful how?

Here's what to do with biblical laws that don't seem to apply to us today. Go behind the superficial details and ask, "Why?" What is the principle behind this law? It's not always clear, but sometimes you *can* identify a core principle. If so, then you start with that principle and reapply it to today. For instance, there's a law that forbids farmers to muzzle an ox while he's threshing grain. Well, few of us have oxen today, and even fewer of us use them in threshing. So what do we do with this? Look for the principle. Why would someone muzzle an ox during threshing? To keep him from eating the grain. But the law says, don't do that. Let the ox whose strength is providing your food eat from that food while he works. Let him enjoy the fruits of his labor. You owe him that much. Now there's a principle that can be reapplied. Paul uses this principle in Corinthians to argue that it's all right to pay preachers. Let the dumb brutes have something to eat. That's good as far as it goes, but I'd apply it even more broadly than that: if you own a business that does well and makes a profit, share those profits with your employees – bonuses, raises, stock options – whatever. Don't abuse those who are doing your work for you. Let them enjoy the fruit of their labor. You owe them that much.

See how this works? Now, when we look closely at these laws regarding manna, there are several important principles there that not only still apply today but are rather important for us.

First principle: *God provides opportunity, not handouts.* Yes, the manna fell miraculously from heaven, but before it was edible, the Israelites had to go out and gather it, knead it, and bake it. God didn't provide fresh bread, but rather made it possible to have some if you were willing to work. There are a lot of ways to apply this principle. We pray for health, for instance. Well, the answer to that prayer may well be the opportunity given to each of us to eat fewer cheese curds and potato chips and get some exercise. A few years ago, we were in Wausau when a devout couple there decided to trust God to heal their daughter, and so they held prayer meetings

beside her bed while she slipped into a diabetic coma – that could have been easily treated – and died. Yes, God does miracles, but no matter how much faith we have, God does not do tricks. In the manna story, we see that even God’s miracles may depend to some degree on our effort.

By the way, this does *not* mean that everyone who is hungry is therefore lazy. The fact is, in our age of growing income inequality, it’s no longer either/or. Most of the people I’ve visited with when I’ve helped serve at the Community Table actually have a job, or two. They show up for the free meal because they need their wages to pay rent or utilities. We don’t get to use this principle to judge other people – only ourselves. But we must do that: Are we looking for handouts from God, or opportunities?

A second principle from this story: *God provides enough, and no more.* The Hebrews were instructed to go out and gather, literally, “in proportion to [your] eating.” Verse 18 says, “*But when they measured it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; each gathered according to what he could eat.*” Now, I’m not completely sure how this all worked, but one thing is plain: God provided what each person needed to sustain life, but no more. God provided *enough*. And . . . um . . . how much is that? That’s the hard part, isn’t it? Because we’re not very good at defining *enough*. I read a few years ago a survey that asked people at different income levels: “At what point would you feel that you had enough?” The consistent response, from every income level, was, “A little bit more than I currently have. *Then* I’d be content.” Follow the logic of that, and we realize that we will never think we have enough. As soon as we reach a new income level, we upgrade our lifestyle and circumstances so that all that new money becomes, once again, not quite enough. It’s like your kitchen cabinets: no matter how much space you have, you’ll fill it and wish that you had more. But God apparently defines *enough* differently. Enough is having adequate food and shelter. In our society, I would add access to medical care and transportation. But beyond that? How much of what we have is more than *enough*? How many of our monthly bills are for things that we don’t need? God provides *enough*. And for that we must be grateful. But what about all this other stuff that we have, over and above enough?

That brings us to the third principle: *What you hoard away for yourself breeds worms and stinks.* Verses 19 and 20 describe this: *And Moses said to them, "Let no man leave any [manna] till the morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and became foul; and Moses was angry with them.* There’s a warning here: be careful about gathering more than enough. Having excess wealth is a dangerous condition for your relationship with God. And it doesn’t take a genius to see this at work. Who are the least contented people? Often it’s the wealthy. It seems that the more we have, the more frightened we are of losing it, and the more obsessed we become with having more. When we are driven to get more, we are driven by what we don’t have rather than grateful for what we do. The more possessions we own, the more our possessions own us, and if we are possessed by our possessions, we do not belong to God. That’s when we breed worms and stink. The section from Proverbs that we used as our call to worship today summarizes this perfectly: God, give me enough, and no more, because if I don’t have enough, I might be tempted to take what I need

from someone else, and if I have too much, I might be tempted to think it's all my own doing and imagine that I don't need you.

But that's sort of scary. We live in the wealthiest nation in world history. All of us here have more than enough. What should we do? Fortunately, there's one more principle from the laws of manna. It says in Exodus 16 that on the sixth day God gave the people double – more than enough – so that on the seventh day they could rest. And, on that day, the manna that they set aside for the next day did not breed worms and spoil. The principle here is simple: *When God provides more than your needs, it is for a purpose.* In Exodus 16, the purpose was so that the people could keep the sabbath. In our case, it may be a different purpose, but the principle is the same: If God has given us more than enough, then it is so that we may serve God better in some way. Perhaps it is to enable us to give more to others. Perhaps it is to help someone else with a project for good. I can't tell what that purpose will be for you. I'm just pretty sure it's not so that you can have a new car every year. If we have been given more than we need, then this principle tells us that it is for a reason. We should be seeking that reason.

I have met many people in this congregation who already take that fourth principle seriously and live it faithfully. Honor those people, because it's not easy. Our culture, to put it bluntly, admires wealth, and everything in our economy encourages us to spend our extra money on ourselves, because, by Cracky, we've *earned* it. And we do. And the more we have the more we spend on ourselves. Statistically, people with the most money give the smallest percentage of their income to help others. Poor people are far more likely to give sacrificially to others. Maybe that's because people at lower income levels live closer to God's own definition of "enough." But whatever the reason, my point is that what God has given us is to meet our basic needs, and every penny above that has been given us in trust. I'm not just talking about tithing or giving to church capital campaigns here – although both, obviously, are excellent practices – I'm talking about a whole shift in how we view our possessions. Trust God for your needs but do your part, too. Thank God when you have enough, and when you have more than enough, don't just squirrel it away or blow it all on yourself. That's when God's blessings get wormy. Instead, regard your surplus as having been given for a purpose. That's the manna principle.