

Bread from Heaven

Exodus 16:2-18

September 24, 2017

Mary Cunningham Gause

Exodus 16:2-18

- 2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.
- 3 The Israelites said to them, "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."
- 4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow My instructions or not.
- 5 On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days."
- 6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the Land of Egypt,
- 7 And in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because He has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?"
- 8 And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him, what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord."
- 9 Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for He has heard your complaining.'"
- 10 And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.
- 11 The 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.'"
- 13 In the evening the quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.
- 14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.
- 15 When 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.
- 16 This 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.'"
- 17 The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less.
- 18 But 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.

Every Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter we would wait. We would loiter around the kitchen for the timer to go off, the oven door to open, and the rolls - those rolls to come out of the piping hot oven, then watch as my mom melted small pats of butter over each one. When she signaled they were ready, 3 children would make a beeline into the kitchen, grab a roll just barely cooled enough to hold in your hand, and then take a bite of the warm, yeasty goodness while moaning and gesturing to signal our happiness over this small, warm loaf of love.

Bread. With respect to our gluten intolerant brothers and sisters, bread just might be one of the universal staples in the world. Most cultures have some sort of "bread like" staple – whether it comes as loaves or bagels or pita; na'an or croissants, rice cakes, tortillas, flatbread, crackers or, if you are very lucky, biscuits – most cultures have some type of bread. It is usually an inexpensive staple made from simple ingredients that are typically available to all despite economic circumstance. It often forms the base of, or in some cases, the actual meal for persons all over the world. It can be

doctored up or dressed down but is often found on many meal tables around the world. And, today, it rests at the heart of our Scripture passage ...

It is helpful to remember that we are early on the Israelite's journey. They are mere days removed from being slaves in Egypt under Pharaoh before they fled with Moses across the Red Sea and into the Wilderness, the place they are now. The preceding chapters to today's text involve song and celebration and thanksgiving to God for delivering the Israelites from slavery, Pharaoh and the Egyptian army; thanks for sending Moses and Aaron to lead them out of a life of horrible conditions and on into this new life full of promise and hope. But now, a new day has dawned and they are taking in their new reality.

They are hungry, tired and, frankly, scared. They have heard about this better life that God will deliver. Moses and Aaron have shared God's promise but what they see is a vast wilderness with no foreseeable food in sight. They are doubting their decision to follow Moses and Aaron out of Egypt and blaming them for taking them away from a place they wrongfully remember as being far better than this. And so out of their fear and anxiety, they begin to grumble, and complain and, well, to whine!

And somehow – a patient God hear the people's cries...and responds to their need. God says, "I will rain down bread from heaven" And indeed bread literally rains down in the form of a flaky, starchy substance called manna. God instructs the Israelites to gather as much as they need for everyone in their household for the day. And they go to work and gather what they need. And there was more than enough for everyone.

And then the next morning, God's grace abounds again. After the fog lifted, an abundance of manna appeared on the ground. And all collected enough manna for their households for that day. And so it went every morning (excluding the days of Sabbath) for forty years. For fourteen thousand, six hundred days the Israelites collected and ate the manna that God provided each and every day.

And after those forty years in the wilderness – when they crossed into the Promised Land – God called them to keep a jar of manna that would not spoil in their homes to remind them of their time in the Wilderness when they trusted God and God provided for them each and every day.ⁱ

This Scripture takes place near the beginning of the relationship between God and God's people, the Israelites. God used something as ordinary as bread to communicate to the Israelites that God wanted to be a part of their everyday lives. Through the act of providing for God's people, God called them to trust God ... to be obedient to God ... to rely upon God each and every day. God wants them to know God is interested – not only in the dramatic moments of their lives like surviving the various plagues in Egypt and crossing the Red Sea in a dramatic fashion - but also in their day to day living. God's daily provision of manna shows God's commitment to God's people ... and invites them to place their trust and reliance upon the God who led them out of Egypt. The Israelites come to realize they need God; And as hearers of these words, we do, too!

Throughout Scripture we see this connection to bread in everyday basic situations to symbolize the ways God wishes to connect with God's people and help them realize their need for God: in the feeding of the five thousand when five loaves of bread and two fishes fed all 5000 present with baskets of bread left over (Luke 9:10-17); in the breaking of bread at the Passover meal as the disciples joined together for a final meal at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-29); in the recognition of the risen Jesus Christ upon the breaking of bread when He dined with the two men that He had met that day on their walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35); in the very claim that Jesus makes that He Himself is THE bread of life sent from heaven for all the world (John 6:34-5). All of which are passages that witness to a God who continues to call us into a daily relationship and continues to make provision for our sustenance.

It is not a coincidence the Lord's Prayer contains the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." When we pray "for our daily bread", we are praying for God to meet our basic needs. We own that we need God – we own that we need God's help each and every day even in the most basic areas of our lives. When our lives and our will rely upon God each and every day we are able to recognize God as the one who is the source and provider of each good thing and every blessing in our lives including our daily bread. When we rely upon God, we are able to move beyond our own selfishness and our own expectations and live into the life God wishes for us.

Note it is give US our daily bread...not give me but give Us. We can't forget that Scripture is communal by nature. When we read about the Israelites we are hearing instruction for a whole community of people – not just individuals. Thus when we hear God provides ... it is not only for our own families and our brothers and sisters next to us in the pews, but also for those down the street, in the next town, the next state, even those across the country and the oceans.

We understand that God doesn't just rain manna all over the world and we all just simply must go out and collect what we need. God in God's grace and omnipotence could have easily placed baskets of bread outside the Israelites doors; God could have created an oasis of fruit trees and fields of wheat and an abundance of livestock for the Israelites but instead chose to rain down manna and quail ... and then instruct them to gather what they need – just what they need. God intentionally involves the Israelites in the process. God doesn't do it all for them – God involves them. And, today, God involves us....and right here, is where I begin to wrestle with this passage

In our reality, some of us throw away the heels of the loaves of bread and the crusts of our pizza; some of us may have food that spoils in our refrigerator before we are able to eat it; our food pantries are inundated by an abundance of leftover bread and pastries that they often throw away. Yet in South Sudan, over 5 ½ million people are in need of food ... most of them children. In our world there are places where a child dies every five seconds from a hunger related issue. That's 16,000 children a year dying because they don't have daily bread.ⁱⁱ This is indicative that the something isn't right. Something isn't working. Something is missing.

I am not really sure what our answer should be. I don't know why some places in our world have perfect conditions for growing abundant crops and others are deserts that produce nothing; I don't know how to solve the problem of food scarcity in some places in our world, while others have abundant resources.

Here's what I do know. I do know God provides everything we need and we are called to be called, to be the church. This is where we are called to be a part of that provision in our communities, in our cities, in our nations, and in our world. God provides everything we need and chooses to involve humanity in the distribution of those resources, especially to those who cannot collect for themselves because of any number of reasons. We are called to care for those who are hungry, we are called to feed those who are without, we are called to push back against systems that keep food out of places where there is great need. We are called to be the church!

Want to close with a story from WWII:

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."

Sleeping with Bread, Holding What Gives You Life, p.1
- Ellsworth Kallas

God provides everything we need in our world and as disciples, the church is invited to be a part of the distribution system. May God grant us the wisdom to determine how to make it happen...together.

All Glory and Honor be to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit...Amen.

Mary Cunningham Gause
September 24, 2017

ⁱ *Bread of Angels*, Barbara Brown Taylor. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Lanham, Maryland, p. 9.

ⁱⁱ www.bread.org