

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 5, 2018.

Manna from heaven. That's what today's lessons are about. God stepping in to rescue us, even when we're grumpy. And we can be grumpy, can't we, when things don't go just the way we want them to go?

From Exodus (**Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15**): "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 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.'"

This is a level of grumpiness well beyond what our kids might say when we decide to go camping without hand-held devices. In this passage, the Israelites, who are on their way back to the Promised Land, claim that they would rather return to slavery in Egypt. In an impressive display of kindness, Moses tells Aaron to assure the grumpy people that food would soon be available. And, sure enough, "quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning ... there was a fine flaky substance." Manna, bread, from heaven. Enough to keep the Israelites moving on their journey home.

In the passage from John's gospel (**Johns 6:24-35**), the people are looking for Jesus. "Where is he? We need him. He fed us – five thousand of us - until we were full. And now we're hungry again. Where is he? We need him again. Well, they found him "on the other side of the sea." But, instead of providing another meal of loaves and fishes, Jesus gives the people a talking-to. "You're looking for bread from heaven? Well, here I am. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Not what the people were looking for, not what they wanted to hear, and definitely not what they wanted to eat. And when we say "people," we're not talking just about the hungry disciples. We're talking about all of us. St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (**Ephesians 4:1-16**) reminds us that "we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming."

In other words, nutrition is more than food for our stomachs. We need spiritual food as well. And where we find this spiritual food is in the Risen Lord. Not as a substitute for conventional food and drink, but as a reminder that conventional food

and drink is not an end in itself, but a means of serving others. Paul says, “We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”

A long way of saying that you and I, individually and collectively, have a responsibility to nourish ourselves in order to nourish others. That’s what the Last Supper is all about. That’s the link between bread and wine and washing feet.

This relationship between nourishment and service is evident in all sorts of ways. There is prayer before a dangerous assignment. There is joining hands before a contest, be it athletic or scholastic. There is a pep talk at the start or conclusion of a staff meeting. There is grace before a family meal. There is prayer offered prior to surgery. And there is a dismissal at the end of our Church service. “Go in peace – to do what? – to love and serve the Lord.”

Today’s Psalm reviews the “manna from heaven” episode. “He rained down manna upon them to eat and gave them grain from heaven ... So they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved.”

This raises the question: for what do we crave, and, more important, why do we crave it? In the Exodus passage, the Israelites are just flat-out hungry. They aren’t thinking of nourishment for service. Once the quail and manna appeared, their hunger was satisfied. The people were nourished, but there’s no indication that the people understand for what purpose the famine was ended. It took Moses to tell them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

It’s when we introduce “the Lord” into the equation that “service” comes to the fore. As God-fearing people, as the Lord’s people, you and I understand that nourishment and service go hand in hand. This relationship is central to the familiar grace before meals: “Bless this food to our use, and us to thy service.”

This is our role. As Paul says to the Ephesians, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of thy calling to which you have been called.” You and I are baptized to serve. That is our calling. We have said so publicly, or someone has said so publicly on our behalf. And we do so, not reluctantly, but with passion. We crave this calling. We’re energized by it. When Moses reminds the people, “It is the bread that Lord has given you to eat,” we respond, “Of course, it is. We understand that God has a role for us, and that this role, when exercised, will require nourishment. All sorts of nourishment, but always with a service purpose.”

The promise that an adult makes at baptism is this: “Do you promise to follow and obey him – Jesus – as your Lord?” The response is “I do.” This answer is a kind of oath that we take voluntarily. A bit like that Oath of Office that is required of public officials, from Supreme Court judges to military enlistees to those serving on juries.

At the end of most if not all of these oaths is the phrase “So help me God.” Interestingly there are no commas in this phrase, suggesting that the promise is a matter of conviction as in “I really mean this,” rather than a matter of faith, as in “So, help me, God.”

For those baptized, the word “God” is not merely a vehicle of conviction, as important as conviction is. For you and me, the word “God” refers to “the Lord” who calls us to service. We want to serve. We crave to serve. We see service as our intended purpose in this life. The opportunity to serve is our manna from heaven. And the model for such service is Jesus, who died on a cross and rose from the dead as an act of service, service that saves.

It is my understanding that those for whom the phrase “So help me God” is awkward can request that the phrase be omitted. Or, if part of a group, the person can simply not utter the phrase when others do. This provision presumably respects freedom of thought. Which is fine. So be it. But there is also the option for the oath-taker of faith silently to add the commas.

The next time you take an oath, see if such a silent addition makes a difference in how you approach your promise, your assignment, be it as a judge or juror or voter or enlistee. “So help me God” coupled with “So, God, help me” is a pretty healthy combination, it seems to me. Our civic duty is nourished by our faith in God. We are promising to serve, not in the abstract, but because this is what God expects and this is what we, in our best moments, crave.

Here is the final verse of today’s gospel: “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” This is our manna from heaven. For us, not quail and a fine flaky substance, but the Lord Jesus. And, being nourished by his love and sacrifice, we can approach our civic duty with a powerful combination of conviction – “So help me God” – and faith – “So, help me, God.”

Something to think about the next time we raise our right hand. Amen.