

Managing the Manna



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In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 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. 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. 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.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. 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. (Exodus 16:14-18)

Catherine: The theme of bread appears quite often in the Bible. Both in the Old and the New Testaments, it is used as shorthand for the basic sustenance of human life. But in both Testaments, there is also a revelatory bread, a bread from heaven, a bread that somehow is a sign of the divine presence. And it is impossible for those within the covenant community totally to separate the ordinary bread and this strange bread from heaven. We know that all of our bread, all that sustains our life, is from God. But when received in thankfulness, even ordinary bread takes on for the faithful the faint resemblance to that other bread, the covenantal bread from heaven. And so today, we shall look very briefly at five passages, oddly intertwined, on the theme of bread.

Justo: The story of the manna in the desert is one of the best known in all the Bible. It has the peculiarity that just about everybody who knows the meaning of the word "manna" also knows

at least something about the story. Yet, it is interesting and significant to note what parts of the story most people remember.

In Sunday school classes and Bible studies in various settings, I have asked people to tell me what they remember of the story of the manna. The immediate answer is something like, "The people of Israel were in the desert. They were hungry and had nothing to eat. And God gave them this bread-like substance called manna."

If I then ask if that is the only miracle they can remember connected with the manna fairly soon someone will say, "Oh, yes, there was a second miracle. If you tried to gather for more than a day at a time, it would rot. Except on the day before the Sabbath, on which you were supposed to gather enough for two days, and then it would keep."

If I still insist that there is at least one other miracle connected with the manna, most often people think that I mean some other event that helped sustain the Israelites in the desert and they mention quails and water from the rock. But very seldom do they mention another miracle of the manna—one which in Scripture is just as important as the miracle of producing the manna, but which is not discussed as often. That is what we might call "the third miracle of the manna."

This other miracle is the miracle of the distribution of the manna. When the manna fell, the head of each "tent" or household went out to collect enough for the family. God had told Moses that they should gather an omer for each member of the household—let's say approximately a quart apiece.

But people being what they are they did not follow these instructions. Apparently, there was a mad scramble for the manna, each trying to get as much as possible. The result was that some gathered much more than they should have and others did not get enough. So far there is no miracle in this part of the story. Indeed, it would have been a miracle if they had followed their instructions strictly, and each had gathered exactly the allotted amount.

However, when they came to measure it a miracle did occur so that those who had gathered too much found that the excess had disappeared, and those who had too little found their supply had increased to the right amount. God had performed a miracle to make the sharing in the resources provided come out right. God had overruled their unjust behavior and made sure that the distribution was righteous.

As I reflect on these various miracles of the manna, I wonder if perhaps one of the reasons we tend to remember the miracle of production and not the miracle of distribution is that we as a

society and as a civilization can boast of imitating God in being productive, but not in the manner our resources are distributed.

Indeed, throughout human history one of the major obstacles to the peace and justice that we associate with the notion of God's Reign is that as we go out to the bountiful banquet of nature that God has provided some of us gather too much and others gather too little. There is more than enough for a just portion for each—as Exodus would say, an omer apiece. But we do not seem to trust God's provision and therefore gather as much as we can, even if that means that others will not have enough.

Catherine: There is an often-overlooked passage in Proverbs that also points to the human need for the right amount, an amount that is neither too little nor too much. In the same way that we often forget that the miracle of the manna included the distribution as well as the production, we often forget that there are spiritual dangers for those who gather too much as well as for those who gather too little, not only of manna, but also of the goods of this world. Proverbs puts it in this way: Proverbs 30:7-9 in the form of a prayer:

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 that I need,

(A comment here: the term is "the food that is my portion" the allotted amount; the amount that was the ration for a soldier.)

feed me with the food that is my portion,
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.

There is equal danger in too much and in too little. The prayer is for the right amount. The danger is not only to the community, creating injustice. The danger is also to the individual. Those who have great abundance may well assume they are not in need of God. They have taken care of themselves. They are not dependent on God, which is in itself a denial of God. The great Reformer, John Calvin, wrote that many people divide their human needs into two categories: those things that they can take care of—they have money in the bank, food in the cupboard, clothes in the closet, a roof over their head, and therefore have no need to ask God for those things. The second category is the things they themselves cannot guarantee: their health, if they are sick, promotions, relationships, things beyond their control. Their prayers to God do not include the first category, but only the second. Calvin says that such a division is a mistake. Even what we think we have gained for ourselves is also in some sense from God. And it is never as secure as we like to think. Such a division leads to the kind of thinking Proverbs condemns: "Lest I be full, and deny you, and say, 'Who is the Lord?'" On the other hand, those who do not have enough may have to steal in order to survive. That is against the law of God, and therefore God's name is profaned. There is no sense that the denial of God is a lesser sin than stealing. Both are wrong. The temptations of the rich may be different than the temptations of the poor, but both lead to sin.

Yet rarely do our prayers include the petition that we be granted only that which is our portion. For many of us, that would probably mean asking for less than we have, and that is not likely to be the content of our prayers. The problem of the manna continues. God has produced in the creation that which we need. But when we gather the fruits of creation, we do not gather only our portion. We are tempted to gather whatever we can. In the Exodus account, it took a miracle to create the right distribution. In Proverbs, the prayer on the lips of the faithful seeks to have us be active participants in the miracle of contemporary distribution of what is needful for human life.

The concern for the right amount—our proper portion—does not end here in Proverbs. In the second century before the time of Christ, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek for the benefit of Jews who did not read Hebrew. The word that is used for "the food that I need" or "the food that is my portion" in this passage from Proverbs is the same word that is used in the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples.

Justo: Although the passage is very well known we seldom notice these particular words: the petition, in the Lord's Prayer, "give us this day our daily bread". The phrase, "daily bread" refers to that which we need, our daily ration, our just portion. As in other cases in Scripture, here "bread" probably stands not just for actual bread, baked wheat flour, but also for whatever material sustenance we need.

In any case, it is clear that the petition is not for as much bread as we can stash away someplace, nor even for as much bread as we can eat. The daily bread is the just portion, the amount that is best for us. Just as the author of Proverbs asked to be given the right amount and neither too much nor too little, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are actually asking to be given the right amount, that which is necessary, wholesome and just, and neither less nor more.

This is a common theme in early Christian commentaries on the Lord's Prayer. When we pray this prayer, we are not only asking for what we need, we are also giving up any claim on all we do not need. By praying this prayer, we are declaring that it is not legitimate to pray for more. And, since we ought not to strive for anything for which it is not legitimate to pray, we are also declaring that it is not legitimate to strive for more than we actually need.

These may be harsh words. But that is actually the meaning of this prayer that we say so lightly and follow so seldom.

Think now of the Lord's Prayer as a many-faceted diamond. You can look into it through each of several facets or petitions and what you see will depend on the facet or the petition through which you enter it.

Entering the Lord's Prayer through this petition, "give us this day our daily bread", several of its other phrases gain meanings we would not see otherwise.

Think first of all of the very form in which we address God: Our Father. The Lord's Prayer appears in Mt. 6. In Mt. 7, Jesus tells his hearers that any earthly parent will give its children what is good for them, and that the same is even more so of the heavenly Parent. Thus, in addressing God as Our Father we are beginning by declaring that we trust God to give us whatever is good for us.

If you then compare this with the similar prayer in Proverbs, you see the parallelism: the author of Proverbs asks God to give what is good, namely neither poverty nor riches. In the Lord's Prayer we ask God, whom we address as Our Father, for exactly the same thing: that which is good for us, our daily bread, neither too little nor too much.

The very first petition is "Hallowed be Thy name". Remember that the prayer of Proverbs asks that we not be too poor, lest we steal and profane the Lord's name. Profaning is the opposite of hallowing.

The next petition is “Thy Kingdom come”. As we saw in our first Bible study, the Kingdom of God is a reign of justice. It is an order in which precisely those things that are necessary for life, our daily bread, food, shelter, and clothing, are provided. They are provided in such a way that none have to go without them. This is the will of God. And it is for the fulfilment of that will that we pray when we say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Think then of that other petition: “Forgive us our trespasses”. We usually think of trespassing as going over a fence, as entering into a field that is posted with “no trespassing” signs. But look at the Lord's Prayer through the entry-point of the daily bread and it becomes clear that we trespass when we gather and hoard for ourselves that which we do not need and thus deprive others of what they do need. In this regard, we know that we are trespassers. Or, as Presbyterians and others say, we are debtors. (I have often wondered why it is that Presbyterians have debts, and Methodists trespasses. But that is another matter.) Inasmuch as we have gathered what is superfluous for ourselves and necessary for others, we are trespassers, we are debtors. (Again, a common theme in early Christian preaching and one which we seldom hear from modern pulpits, is that those of us who have more than we need are debtors of those who do not have enough.)

Finally, the “temptation” and the “evil” from which we ask to be delivered are, as Proverbs would have put it, the temptation of having too much, and the temptation and the evil of having too little.

Catherine: From the miraculous manna—the bread from heaven—we have moved to the daily bread that all human beings need to sustain earthly life, and the prayers in both Testaments that seek to be given only what is our just portion, But the New Testament also has its form of the bread of heaven in the Incarnate One whose redemptive work continues to be shown forth in the Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. Paul records a problem with distribution at the Lord's Table that has interesting parallels to the ancient account of the manna. In his first Letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts the reports he has heard about their disorderly celebrations of the Supper:

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!
(1 Corinthians 11:20-22)

And then Paul tells them again what the Lord's Supper means, beginning immediately with the words: "For I received from the Lord Jesus what I also hand on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed. . . ." This is the most famous account we have of the institution of the Lord's Supper. It occurs in the midst of a reprimand because of the poor distribution of food at the supper.

The church, as Israel, has received a surprising gift, a gift of bread that shows forth the presence and the redemptive work of God in the midst of the people of God. The bread is a sign of God's redemptive love, concern, and provision for the people. In both cases, the reception of the bread is intended to be an occasion for the uniting of the people in concern for each other, shown by generous and just actions, making sure that each one has the portion that they need. In both cases, the community's response is not what it should be.

These central elements of our religious life are intended not simply for religious services. Rather, they are intended to train the faithful for their whole lives so that their lives, both individually and as a community, are shaped and molded by the way in which God has dealt with them.

Justo: We usually think of Paul as the great preacher and planter of churches and of his epistles as theological treatises dealing with issues such as the resurrection, predestination, grace, and so on. But the truth is also that much of Paul's work among the Gentile churches was the collection for the poor in Jerusalem and that several of his epistles are, at least in part, fund-raising letters. Actually, there is evidence that the Jewish community in Jerusalem had the custom of sending out emissaries to collect money for Jerusalem and that these emissaries were called "apostles". Thus, when Paul calls himself an apostle, although it is clear that he is

arguing that he has been commissioned to preach, it is quite possible that he is also arguing that he has been commissioned to collect funds for Jerusalem.

It is clear that the collection for the church in Jerusalem plays a fairly prominent role in the letters of Paul. Some interpreters have claimed that the church in Jerusalem became poor because they had sold all they had, eaten the proceeds, and been left with nothing to live on. There is nothing in the New Testament to support such an interpretation. On the contrary, there is every indication, supported by both pagan and Jewish historians, that there was a general famine in Palestine at this time. If such was the case, what most likely happened was that the church in that region, composed mostly of people of meager means, was sorely tried to meet the most urgent needs of the poorest among them.

At least in some cases, Paul postponed his purely missionary voyages for the sake of his fund-raising activities. Thus, in Romans 15:25-27, he explains to the Romans that his hope for visiting them has to wait until he finishes his work on the offering for the Jerusalem church: "for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to establish a koinonia (a partnership) with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." Paul then goes on to say that these Gentiles "were pleased to do it, and indeed they are in debt to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings."

In his Corinthian correspondence, the first letter deals, as Catherine has just pointed out, with the sharing of bread and other resources within the congregation. The second letter deals rather extensively with the sharing of resources with the poor in Jerusalem.

In II Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul challenges the church in Corinth to fulfill what they had promised to the suffering church in Jerusalem:

It is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire . . . I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack." (2 Corinthians 8:10-15)

The quote is from the Exodus passage with which we began.

In both Romans and Corinthians, Paul points out a sharing that is both in material and in spiritual goods. The Gentiles had received and were still receiving a share in the spiritual resources of the Jerusalem church and therefore ought to share with them the material resources that they possessed. It is the same expectation expressed later in the Didache: "if we share in immortal goods, ought we not also share in mortal ones?"

But it is also much more than that. It is also that the God of the Bible is the God of the manna, the God who provides food for the people in the desert, and who also redistributes it when people foolishly produce an unjust distribution. The God of the Bible is the God to whom

Christians must pray for the right amount, for daily bread, for that which is neither too much nor too little. Because this is the God whom the Corinthians claim to worship, their community must be one which seeks to repeat the miracle of the manna, to distribute and share its resources in imitation to what God did for the people of Israel in the desert, so that the abundance of some may supply the want of others and there be equality, as it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack."

All around us, God provides the manna—the bountiful resources of the earth. We are commanded to gather it in thanksgiving and praise as the children of Israel did. And we are also commanded to share it in equality and justice, as faithful followers of the God who in the desert not only provided the manna but also saw to its distribution.

Catherine: We have events of bread: the manna in the Wilderness, the ritual of the Lord's Supper; and we have prayers: the one from Proverbs and the Lord's Prayer. There is a connection. Those whose identity is formed by the events are called upon to continue living out of that identity. One of the major ways that is accomplished is through the prayers that they pray. Yet these prayers have been overlooked or domesticated so that the sharpness of what they are calling us to ask is lost.

As Christians, we need a constant reminder of the connection between the rituals incorporated in our worship and the life of discipleship which we live out daily. If we daily prayed the Lord's Prayer with its full meaning, if the words of the prayer in Proverbs were on our lips, then when we gathered for worship it might be with greater understanding of what we are doing. But for many of our churches, the issue of whether we have received too much or too little is rarely a matter that is part of our worship. There are two problems that hinder us. First, our congregations are often divided by economic class so those who have too much may not be in the same worship service as those who have too little. Second, there is great hesitancy to speak of our financial situation in worship. It is interesting that in congregations of the poor, there is often little hesitancy to ask for the prayers of others because a job has been lost, or there is not enough money for food, or an eviction notice has been received, or there is illness in the family. It is then quite possible for others in the congregation to come to their assistance in whatever way they can. But those who have more than enough are usually separate congregations and never have the opportunity to hear the needs of other Christians. Furthermore, they themselves rarely ask for the prayers of the congregation because they have more than they need and want guidance for its use.

It is not a matter of praying that God will give us only our portion and then passively waiting to see how much that is. The story of the manna and Paul's words to the Corinthian church point to the active role we are expected to take. No third miracle should be needed. We ourselves should so order our lives that what has been maldistributed is put back into balance. The

sacrament, the prayers, are at least in part to shape us into people for whom such actions are possible. The community of the Body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit, is in itself the miracle that leads to the proper management of the manna, of all the resources that we have received. If our congregations were really like this, then our worship and our lives of discipleship would flow into one another in astonishing ways. When the Holy Spirit is fully leading the congregation, the church is itself the third miracle of the manna. What a witness to the world that would be.

