

Eat It All Today

St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Kathryn Nystrand Dwyer
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Exodus 16

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 go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.* 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.'" ¹⁰And 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. 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.'"*

¹³*In 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.*

John 6:24-35

²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

²⁸Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³²Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Winnie the Pooh was one of the favorites in our house when the kids were young. We had a life size Eeyore and Piglet on the walls in the nursery and read all of the Pooh stories, many times. Do you remember the character of Eeyore?

Good morning, Eeyore," said Pooh.

"Good morning, Pooh Bear," said Eeyore gloomily. "If it *is* a good morning, which I doubt," said he.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Pooh Bear, nothing. We can't all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it."

"Can't all *what*?" said Pooh, rubbing his nose.

"Gaiety. Song-and-dance. Here we go round the mulberry bush." \

Or ...

"Nobody tells me. Nobody keeps me Informed. I make it seventeen days come Friday since anybody spoke to me."

"It certainly isn't seventeen days - "

"Come Friday," explained Eeyore.

"And today's Saturday," said Rabbit.

Can you hear the grumbling? The Israelites in this passage from Exodus and the crowds who are following Jesus sound a little like Eeyore to me. Grumble ... grumble. "Oh Bother! Nothing will ever work out." Eeyore sensed that no matter what happened, that whatever he wanted to happen would go wrong and he could count on it. So Eeyore lives his life with his head down and his tail bedraggled because that is what he expects out of life.

And that is what we hear in both of these stories. The Israelites, stumped with how they are going to be fed, are ready to toss it all in, "We should have just died when we were in the midst of those good times. When we were eating our fill from those fleshpots! Those were the good ol' days – we should have just stopped right then when we were ahead!"

And the crowds, following Jesus around as if he is some spectacular road show, are not much better. They have been watching him heal people. They have watched him walk on water. They watched him feed 5,000 people from a few fish and loaves of bread. "Hey! Where are you going? We are kind of liking this! Don't go anywhere else! We want to see the next magic trick!

Could you hear Jesus' rising anger?

"Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes but the food that endures?"

What must we do to perform the works of God?

Believe in God. Believe in God's faithfulness. Believe God will provide. Live your life looking for God's gifts and appreciating them when they come.

They were not getting it. What "sign" will you give us? Moses gave the Israelites manna from heaven. What will be our sign?

There is growing frustration here on Jesus' part. Every time we hear "Very truly, I tell you..." we could read, "Pay attention! I don't want to say this again!" *Very truly, I tell you* it was not MOSES, it was God. *Very truly, I tell you* that God's gifts are not a one-time thing, they are daily occurrence. *Very truly, I tell you* that God will provide one way today and another tomorrow... God's gifts keep coming, the sustenance keeps coming. *Very truly, I tell you* that our God continuously provides! *Very truly, I tell you* God continually makes a way! We must just pay attention.

The crowds were looking for Jesus to do something that looked like magic. The Israelites were looking for fleshpots, literally pots of meat. If you are only looking for one specific thing, if you have a narrowly defined notion of how God might provide a meal or a solution or a way, you might miss it. It would be like only keeping your eye out for the Mitchell's Steakhouse truck to deliver a big juicy steak to your door or only looking for the Schmidt's to personally come to your door with a grill fired up with Bahama Mama's.

Moses told the Israelites that there would be meat in the evening and bread in the morning, but they did not see any fleshpots. Instead, there was quail in the evening. Maybe that quail had been there all the time and they had never noticed it before. In the morning, there was dew that

fell that left a flaky substance. “What is this?” they asked. They did not recognize the gift that was right in front of them.

Can we recognize the gifts that are in front of us?

Today we are celebrating our 137th anniversary as a church. We are not the same church that we were 7 years ago, let alone 137 years ago. 137 years ago, this was a German congregation in a German neighborhood. There were different challenges then – liking finding seminary trained German speaking pastors or shifting to be able to accommodate growth and those who came to the area who could not speak German.

In the 1920s, there were more than 1000 people in the Sunday School classes and I am sure there were challenges with bathrooms on Sundays and orchestrating the annual parade and games that were held in Schiller Park for the Sunday School Picnic.

100 years later, this neighborhood is vastly different, and so is our congregation. We are now in the heart of a city that is very diverse; and we have come to reflect that diversity. Rather than grumbling about a shifting population and members who have moved away from the heart of the city, we have embraced our location as an asset and as a gift – as an opportunity to be at the cross-section of culture and to fully engage with the community around us. This is one of the things that keeps me energized for our ministry together. Downtown isn’t a natural magnet for churches and we are discovering that another gift of our location is that it forces us to be clear about our mission and our vision so that others will know what we are about.

However, are we really seeing all of the gifts that are in front of us? *Very truly, I tell you* there must be more out there because we know God is continually providing them. I say that to

convince myself as well as you. Before I left for vacation some of you heard me express my frustration with our Christian formation program. I may have even sounded a little like Eeyore, Oh Bother! What is the use! Where are the kids? Where are the teachers? Where is the interest? Where is the Sunday School of my childhood? I am looking for it – for the teacher I had all year long – who seemed as though she had been planning for the class all week and couldn't wait to see me, with the Bible stories we acted out and the cute little crafts we made, and the little cinnamon grahams on a napkin and pre-poured lemonade that we were given at our table during the last 10 minutes of every class?

Newsflash, Kathy!!! You are not going to find the Sunday School of 1920 or 1970. Stop looking for flesh pots! If we are stuck in the fleshpots of Egypt or the feeding of the 5000 that we only saw as a one time magic act, or if we are stuck in *any* specific experience that was powerful for us, and so we can't see beyond it, then we can't move forward with any confidence that God is with us today.

Very truly, I tell you God will provide. I hope I am beginning to trust that.

The final question for today: **Can we embrace the gifts we receive without hoarding them or trying to preserve them forever?**

When the Israelites finally figured out that the white stuff falling from the sky was bread they wanted to hoard it because they were afraid there wouldn't be any more the next day. Moses warned them. But they did not listen – they tried to keep it and it got worms and turned foul. It would be like looking at all that ice cream outside today and saying, “Hmmm... we better not use all of this. We better put some back and freeze it so we can be sure to have an ice cream social again next year. And, of course, there would be freezer burn on it after awhile. And, of

course, we will find a way to celebrate somehow again next year. So, eat it all today. You don't have to stuff yourself. Just take what you want, and trust that God will continue to provide.

Very truly, I tell you - As the great hymn goes,

Great is Thy faithfulness,

Great is Thy faithfulness,

Morning by morning new mercies I see:

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

Amen.