

After the Manna
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; Joshua 5:9-12
Lent 4

Joshua 5:9-12

⁹The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have *rolled* away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” And so that place is called *Gilgal* to this day.

¹⁰While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain.

¹²The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

¹¹“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!’¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”²⁰So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him.

²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

The Sermon

It was back when God had finally freed the people from slavery in Egypt, and they had been following Moses in the wilderness for a few weeks, and their memories of being treated as less than human in Egypt were still fresh—

but not as fresh as their memories of also having had enough food.

They were hungry.

And out there in the empty wilderness where there was nothing, no matter how liberating it was, philosophically, to have been rescued and delivered from bondage, when they thought about the food they had had access to in their slavery, they missed it. They dreamed about it. They salivated over their memories of it. And they longed for it.

Out in those arid plains, there is no place to go to get food—they’re in a literal food desert—and even if food could be bought somewhere, there is no economy in which to get jobs to pay for it.

There was only the newly homeless community, with no clear sense of how they could possibly flourish as a neighborhood except the hope of following Moses following God.

And they’d go to Moses and Aaron and go, “If only we had died back in Egypt—at least there we could sit down at the all-you-can-eat buffet. You’re out here trying to kill us all from hunger.”

And Moses went to God and said: What am I supposed to do with these people?

And God said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people will go out and gather enough for that day. The sixth day of the week, they’ll be given twice as much, so they don’t have to gather it on the Sabbath.”

In the morning, the people went out, and they found a fine, flaky substance all over the ground.

They said, “What is it?” And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

Manna was given so that all would have enough.

The people would be provided their fill, and *no more than* their fill. They would have to rely on God’s daily provision. The survival of you and your neighbors and the whole community would depend on each household both recognizing and caring that if any of them echoed the extraction- and surplus-practices of Pharaoh, gathering more than they needed for their own family for that day, their neighbors would be deprived.

First to suffer would be those physically unable to go out and compete for the limited resource—women with children; the elderly; those with physical and mental disabilities. If any suffered deprivation due to the faithlessness of some, the whole community would suffer.

So in providing the manna, God was giving them two things:
enough food for each person to have enough to eat,
and a mandate that you had to be thoughtful about what you took
and what you left for others.

Long years of wandering went by, and God finally brought the people into the land where they could grow their own produce, and when they did, the manna ceased. From then on, God charged the people with carrying the same ethic: don't hoard and take away from other people's ability to have enough.

From now on, the manna would not miraculously appear in the morning so that all could be fed. From now on, it was up to the People of God to make sure that all were fed.

It was more than a millennium later when the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

And they did what you and I recognize from the army of talking heads on TV: they zeroed in on one thing they observed, pulled it out, and projected it wide. They said: "This fellow, Jesus, *welcomes* sinners—and *eats* with them!"

And the subtext for the whole world—but especially for those who might be stirred to action—was: this should make you think twice, and this should make you sick. And what Jesus is doing should rile you to your core.

Which is exactly how people in high places need people in lower places to react to anything that threatens to upend those positions.

So Jesus told them the parable of a property holder with two inheritors,
and the elder son who stayed home
and generally followed the rules and the expectations,
and the younger son who claimed his share early,
squandered the whole thing,
came back home starving and repentant,
and was welcomed with a blowout party.

It's easy to associate with that younger son in part because we all know that our record isn't as good as it probably ought to be and, like the younger son, we are inclined to be thankful to God for giving us second, third and 400th chances.

But I would submit that by and large, most of us are probably not the younger sibling for two reasons: one, for all the mistakes and bad judgments we've made, most people don't tend to think of ourselves as ever having done anything that blatantly, spectacularly wrong (without being able to present a raft of justifications and rationalizations).

And two, we've never been that sorry.

Because repenting is not just feeling philosophical regret.

It's when you feel it enough to go back and say you're sorry, to accept a greatly diminished place—no more claims of being entitled to enjoy “the lifestyle to which I was previously accustomed.”

It's when you feel sorry enough to try to figure out a way to make it right with the person or the community whom you have wrongfully, selfishly disrupted.

If you have made a lot of those kinds of apologies and that level of expression of repentance, God bless you.

If you are among the rest of us who haven't, God bless us, too: the ones who, for a number of reasons, see ourselves in that older brother.

We're the ones who stay in our place and pretty generally see ourselves as following the rules. When you occupy a pretty good place in society, you tend to do that. The rules work for us, and more or less we tend to follow them.

We know we're far from perfect; we know we've made some shameful mistakes—but we also know we haven't sinned as blatantly or as recklessly as others.

Maybe we have in common with that older brother that we feel pretty comfortable speaking conclusively about the motivations of those prodigal others, because we can only see anyone else's actions through the lens of ourselves.

And we're not always great at recognizing apologies and accepting people back into the fold, particularly when we still haven't finished pitching a fit, regardless of the fact that things have changed for the better for everyone involved.

And definitely we have in common with the complaining older brother who stayed home and worked hard that when we are pitching that fit, we have a loving and compassionate voice that pleads with us to listen, and to try to understand, and to trust in the extraordinarily generous gift of the inheritance that we already have, which was never remotely threatened by the actions and the stupidities of the younger sibling:

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

We live in a world where God has given us all what we need to make sure that everyone has enough.

We are supposed to be able to make this work.

We have been given the manna of forbearance and forgiveness and grace and compassion and understanding.

We can be irritated with and disappointed in the younger brother; we can be furious at his decisions and bothered by his behavior.

But we live in a post-manna world, in which God is not going to spoon-feed those things out on our behalf without us having to do anything.

We are going to have to do the work of planting and watering and tending and harvesting those gifts, and feeding ourselves and the world with that produce.

The tax collectors and sinners were all still sitting around Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes who had seen that and said, “This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them” were all still there, too.

And Jesus finished telling his parable about the father, who welcomed home and even threw a party for the son who had taken his inheritance early and squandered it, and who also tried to comfort and encourage the other son who had done everything as he had been taught to do and didn’t like the other son being able to come home and be forgiven and restored.

From now on it is up to us to live into God’s vision for the world: a world where all are fed, and all are welcome.

On the day the manna ceased, God said to Joshua, “I have *rolled away* from you the disgrace of Egypt.”

I have rolled away the shame of your captivity to the Pharaoh’s system to which you are a slave: an economy built on extracting resources from other people, a political economy based on Pharaoh’s terror that his historic surpluses would be threatened.

God told Joshua that God had *rolled* the people’s shame away, which is the same verb used in Matthew, Mark, and Luke to describe what happened to the stone that had been used to seal Jesus in the tomb where he was buried with the shame of the people for whom he had died: God rolled it away, and the risen Christ, once dead, was now at large and alive and unstoppable in the world.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
March 31, 2019