

Sermon Text for August 23, 2020

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Exodus 16:1-6, 13-15, Matthew 6:9-13

“Give us this day our daily bread”

So what have you done differently during this pandemic? Like, have you picked up any hobbies or done some things that you would never have had the time or the motivation to do but now in this time you seem to be doing more than before? I heard someone tell me that during this pandemic you will become one of four things. A hunk, a chunk, a drunk, or a monk. Have you found yourself moving in any of those directions during this time. I’ve found myself running more, getting up earlier in the mornings to run, reading more books than I have in the past. Bethany and Stacy have picked up together baking bread and using two different starters that came from the same starter. Is there anything better than a big slab of butter on a hot piece of bread that has just come out of the oven? Maybe I am moving toward the direction of a chunk.

Bread should be considered the cultural staple of the world, especially when it comes to food. Every single culture values bread and it carries an incredibly important role in all the countries where I have lived and where I have traveled. I’ll never forget in 1991 when I got off a bus with a group of Americans as we made our way to Smolensk, Russia to help rebuild the cathedral of the town after it had been given back to the Orthodox church after generations of atheism in Russia, we were treated like superstars and as we stepped off the bus there were a row of women dressed in traditional Russian clothes each holding a loaf of bread, and we had to go up and take a piece and eat it. It was delicious. But that was their way of welcoming us and offering us that which was precious in their midst.

I remember driving early Sunday morning to our church in Salerno, Italy on communion Sundays knowing that there would be no stores open to buy bread. Now, keep in mind I never had sandwich bread the 13 years that I lived in Italy, only the real loaf of bread, and you couldn’t get that the day before and serve that for communion, it had to be fresh. So on our way out of town we knew that on Sunday morning there was always one street vendor who sold bread on Sunday mornings in the midst of all the closed shops. We would stop and get bread once a month from Gaetano, and we built up a friendship.

I remember living in Honduras and watching a young woman making tortillas working hard over a fire and piece of metal on the fire. It seemed like she was making hundreds of them,

hunched over that fire, and while they all looked the same they were each made individually and with a care and concern that you knew that when you ate those tortillas they were so good you could just eat them plain without anything else on them and they could serve as a meal.

Then most recently I had not a great encounter with bread, some of you might like it, the black bread of Russia, I guess it is Rye bread, which we ate after we had served our clients at the soup kitchen in Moscow we as the staff would sit down and eat the same meal that our clients did, just to make sure that what we were feeding others was more than acceptable, it was something we would eat as well. The Russian kitchen crew couldn't understand why we would eat the same food, they wanted to make us something special as the staff, and we said no. I almost asked if they had different bread than the black bread, but I didn't. Apparently people like it.

Give us this day our daily bread is a universal request targeted for all people who are hungry and who are in need. It is our next phrase and it reminds us that God will provide not only for our physical needs, but also for our spiritual needs as well. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURE

So we can't really read this phrase without being aware of the Scripture in Exodus from which Jesus' statement really comes. Let's go back to Exodus and we find the people in the midst of the wilderness and as people tend to do when they are in the middle of the wilderness they get hungry and as a result they complain. You see, I can relate to that. Anyone else like me get hangry? I mean, when I am hungry the next emotion that comes is anger. It may be that there is absolutely no one to blame for me being hungry but my emotions turn into making sure that I am angry with anyone with whom I come into contact simply because I am hungry. I enjoy food so much that when I am deprived of it, I get angry with everybody. Well, the Israelites were especially angry with God for the situation in which they found themselves.

What we find here is that the people complained and God..., well, he provided. God provided as we read, something, the people ask the question: what is it, which in Hebrew is Manna. It was God's mystery meat, well that was actually the quail. What we call the bread, the manna was what God said in vs. 4 was what he would rain down from heaven so that the physical needs of the people could be met. But how would they be met? Daily. Every single day you had to go out and pick up the bread from the ground. Daily, every single day God would provide that same bread.

In times of wilderness experiences we call out to God and we have no idea what God is going to do, even though in the back of our minds we know that God will provide, we just don't

know how. When God provides sometimes we ask the question, what is that? What in the world did God do? From 2008 to 2011 First Presbyterian went through a time that many of you have described to me as a wilderness experience. People were unkind to each other, people left the church, people didn't understand how folks who were in the same family, taking the same journey, could treat each other the way that we did. We are now 12 years removed from 2008, hard to believe, and we can look back and see how God has provided time, after time, after time. Each time we may have asked, what in the world is that, but then we come to find out that it was exactly what we needed at the time.

We now find ourselves in the midst of a wilderness. Not so much the church, I feel like our strength remains as we focus on our Savior Jesus Christ, but we find ourselves in this country in a wilderness experience. People are divide, fractured, some are wishing we had stayed in the past, nearly 50 years ago, other wish that we could move forward into a future that is kinder and gentler and more what looks like the kingdom of God. As a church our job is to be that voice that is calm and is able to confidently say that God will provide. Daily we have to go out and lead by example, every single day. Our words, our actions, our voting, our energies, all that we do and say has to go into providing an example for our culture of what it looks like to be a family that even in the midst of the wilderness knows that this too shall pass and that God will provide. We have to be okay in not knowing when that is, while we trust that it will be.

When we see these words in Matthew in light of the Exodus we see the disciples and the crowds of people on the Mount of Beatitudes as they were facing their own similar wilderness experience. Rome was in charge and they were a little higher than slaves and they were hearing from pastors and preachers that the Messiah was about to come and lead them to a political liberation. You may be in pain now, but joy comes in the morning. Now this Rabbi, a guy named Jesus, is telling us to pray to God that we would have our needs met on a daily basis, as if that ever happened. But he does seem to care about our lunch, though. Just the other day he fed us fish and bread, and it was pretty good. Maybe I will listen to him.

Jesus tells the crowds in John 6:26: "You are looking for me not because of my miracles, but because you ate your fill of bread that I provided." This crowd had been hangry as well. Just like the Israelites in the wilderness. As a result Jesus feeds them. Even God is concerned about their lunch. This prayer that we are learning in the literal Greek should actually be: Today give us what we need for tomorrow. This was a crowd of blue collar workers who had been to the square early in the morning as field laborers and they knew what it was like to be picked up for work early in the morning, but they also knew what it was like to not be picked up at all. Since

you were paid at the end of the day, if you didn't work, you didn't get paid, which means that you didn't have money to buy your food the next day. Give us this day what we need in order to eat tomorrow.

This prayer may seem like it only addresses the promise that God gives that God will address our physical needs. We have that promise, and our sermons in tithing reinforce that promise. There was a man who had inherited a tract of land and it was completely overgrown with weeds and rocks and it was a mess. The man put in weeks of work in order to get it in shape and finally was able to plow it. His neighbor walked over after it had been plowed and said to him: "Isn't it wonderful what God has done with this bit of ground?" The man who had just worked to get the field in shape said: "Yes, but you should have seen this bit of ground when God had it to himself." We are called to participate in God's bounty with our toil, with our hard work, with our imagination.

But God also provides for us His Spiritual bread as well. We read in Deuteronomy 8:2-3 after they had finished their time in the wilderness God tells them: "quote". I have often said that we cannot miss what the lesson is as we walk through this wilderness together. If we abandon our joint mission, if we abandon each other we will not learn any lessons from this time. We will find ourselves hungry time after time unaware that God is providing our daily needs, both physically and spiritually. In John 6:35 Jesus tells his disciples: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

Our challenge today is to not take for granted the daily bread we are used to receiving and that maybe we even think we deserve. It is a gift, no one deserves a gift, a gift is given and received either gratefully or thinking they somehow earned it themselves. This prayer and our desire to ask God to provide daily recenters us to remember who the provider is. In this time of pandemic, or wilderness, identify what your need might be and pray for that and let go of that which is not necessary. When we do, then we will see God meet our physical and spiritual needs. Amen.