

Nora Pederberg
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Osler Mennonite Church

God's Gift of Contentment:

Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-15, Psalm 145

Hello Everybody,

We began this service proclaiming our call to worship with the words of Psalm 145, fulfilling the scriptures themselves as we pronounced together that **they'll speak of the splendor of your glorious majesty, and I will meditate on your wondrous acts. They'll discourse of the power of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness.** This Psalm is powerful because in reading it, in proclaiming it, we are setting up our disposition towards God and towards this world. It is participation in the anticipation of what will be, by living out of hope and conviction in our declaration of God's goodness. Psalm 145 is filled with the language of Ruling, Reigning, and Dominion. It asserts that God's deeds reveal to us the character of God, and therefore contain within them the hallmarks of God's kin-dom. To confess this Psalm is to choose to live in the world God has put before us, to set our lives within the context of God's reign where the fundamental reality is the gracious, compassionate, faithful love of God. This puts those who follow God at odds with the messaging of the world around us; this is true not just for us today, but also for the people in our scripture texts for this morning.

When reading these chapters from Exodus and Matthew, it is tempting to point fingers at the 'ungrateful' masses, marking them as whiney and greedy. God does not respond with this kind of judgement, and based on this I will argue neither should we. These stories show us a God who is gracious, patient, and listening to the hearts of the people. When we listen to the complaints of the Israelites, it is necessary to remember what this community has been through, and the impacts trauma and poverty have had in shaping their world view. The people cry out in fear that they will not have enough to eat, that they will starve and they crave the security of what they know rather than the unknown. This response is fundamental to human nature, then and now. Liberation

theologians note a tendency in oppressed people(s) to cling to the security of the old, no matter how evil it might be, instead of venturing into an uncertain future. When leaving situations of abuse or harm it is extremely challenging to feel safe in a new environment. These people have found survival mechanisms within a specific social structure, and with the liberation from this structure a fear comes over them because the path of survival they know is not useful here, and they have experienced that the world is cruel. It is cause for panic and anxiety.

These are the hurting, scared survivors that God sees and meets with compassion when they lash out in fear, journeying in the liminal space between bondage and healing. God introduces them to a new way of seeing the world, and a new relationship with provision. YHWH gently responds with assurance, and an invitation to a relationship of trust. They are being given the gift of enough, and introduced to the gift of contentment. The world of bondage was a culture of scarcity, where there was never enough. Brene Brown writes that “there is only one way out of scarcity and that is ‘enough-ness.’” Manna and quail are the markers of provision and the reliability of YHWH. It is a constant act that affirms each day that God is with them. God is building for them a framework for living in a state of well-being and freedom in God’s reign, inviting them to let go of mechanisms they used to survive the bondage of pharaoh’s society.

This is re-affirmed in the assurance of Sabbath: **On the sixth day, when they prepare what they brought in, it will be twice as much as the daily gathering** [Exodus 16:5]. Sabbath is a way of contrasting Egypt with the wilderness. Egypt is a place where bread is won only through labor; it is a transaction based on one’s productivity and it is always received with anxiety and uncertainty of one’s worth. The gift of manna is a decisive break from this understanding. The people will always receive enough for the day because they are loved. It is a dependence that is met with complete fidelity, and creates the opportunity for new mentalities of trust and enough are being given time to form for this community. Provision of basic needs like food and rest are the hallmarks of the kin-dom of God.

There is a reason for the term ‘enough’ rather than ‘abundance.’ The opposite of scarcity is not abundance; chasing after abundance is still rooted fear. To accept the gift of contentment is to reject the insatiable fear that drives the pursuit of abundance – this chase can never give us peace. The limitation God puts in place is not the result of a stingy God; it creates the daily fulfillment of God’s unchanging promise to provide for the community. The dangers of running from scarcity in abundance are highlighted in our Gospel story. The vineyard parable is placed in a larger set of teachings on discipleship and wealth, a clarifying on the new riches the believers are about to receive. The parable serves to subvert our conventional values around fairness, and what it means to receive **“whatever is fair.”** [Matt. 20:4]

Those learning a lesson are the members who have worked a full day for their wages. A lesson in satisfaction and what it means to be content with ‘enough,’ so much so that there is no greed for more and no resentment towards others getting topped up. The labourers who worked the longest watch the generosity of the landlord towards those who worked very little and begin calculating what their bonus will end up being – plugging in a formula of productivity and earned reward. They do not initially reject the generosity of the landlord as they assume it will benefit them as individuals. When at last they are paid and it is only the agreed upon amount, enough for a day’s survival, they object because it feels like a diminishment of their worth.

This is a scarcity mindset, because other people have been raised to the same level as them, they feel that their reward is somehow worth less. They have lost their hierarchy of worthiness, and that is part of the point because there is no room for disciples to turn faith into a rating system where there is a striving for the top. The landlord asserts **“My friends, I do you no injustice. You agreed on the usual wage.”** [Matt. 20:13]. In the parable, this refers to the wages, but to Jesus’ disciples this is a reminder to the deal they have signed up for in their relationship to God, receiving the love of God as a gift and recognizing that there is no ‘earning’ our provision. The day’s supplies, our manna, is a

gift, as is the opportunity to work in God's vineyard, to live in the freedom of the wilderness, and to experience what it means to live in the reign of God.

God's generosity is an equity issue, not a fairness game that attempts to measure human worth. The owner's generosity does not diminish the worth of others because it was never weighing the workers' contributions. Instead the promise is to do whatever is fair, whatever is just. This is the landowner that does not send a manager to pick up day workers, but goes in person again and again, even to the last hours of the day to invite anyone who is searching to participate in the work of the vineyard. And the promise not only of participation, but the gift of provision. This perspective claims that it is not the individual rights that we are to focus on, but our role within a community. The early labourers are to rejoice in the good fortune of their neighbours, and they are to recognise that they can do so because they have enough. The gift of being content in what we have allows us to be joy-filled, rather than envious when another human is able to make it through the day. This takes trusting in the lessons of the daily manna provided to us. Contentment allows us to declare with our lives the words of today's Psalm: **“The eyes of all look to you in hope, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. YHWH, you are just in all your ways.”** [Psalm 145:15-17]

The gift of enough is life saving in providing sustenance for the wandering Israelites recovering from abuse. It also saves the fortunate from being so consumed by greed and the pursuit of more wealth that they miss out on the joy of the freedom contentment brings; the freedom to rejoice in God's compassion and mercy. It is the gift of being secure enough in God's love that we can let go of worldly markers of worth and instead make room for all people to have enough to make it to their next day.

Resources: New Interpreters Bible Commentary; New Believers Commentary Series; Various Brene Brown YouTube clips.

Benediction

For those people worshiping with us here at church, please remain in your seats until the ushers indicate that it is your turn to exit. We ask that you move directly to the parking lot to ensure physical distancing. Thanks for your help in keeping us all safe.

[Adapted from Christine Longhurst re:worship, based on Psalm 145:13-14]

As you leave this place, remember:
God always keeps Their promises.
God is unfailingly gracious toward us.
When we stumble, God is there to catch us;
when we are weighed down by grief or trouble,
God is there to strengthen and encourage us.
So go from here in the knowledge
that the love and mercy of God goes with you.
Amen.