

Carol M. Strickland  
 First Presbyterian Church  
 17th Sunday of Ordinary Time, July 24, 2016  
 Texts: Exodus 16:2-5, 12-15; Matthew 7:7-11

## Give Us Daily Bread

### *Introduction to Scripture*

Our Old Testament reading is from Exodus. The Israelites have made their exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. But they grow anxious about their survival and begin to complain. How quickly oppressive slavery in Egypt becomes preferable to freedom in the wilderness. Let's see how God answers their anxious complaining. Listen for God's word: *Exodus 16:2-5, 12-15*.

Our New Testament reading is from the Sermon on the Mount, just a chapter after Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer. Listen again for God's word: *Matthew 7:7-11*.

### *Sermon*

We are examining the Lord's Prayer. We have talked about the address to "Our Father" and the first three petitions concerning God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will. Now we turn to the first of the three petitions concerning us, "Give us this day our daily bread." For the purposes of this sermon, we'll boil the petition down to four words, "Give us daily bread." These four words we will consider in turn. Only we'll take them in reverse order: bread, daily, us, and give.

First, *bread*. The mention of bread immediately lets us know that the religion Jesus espoused was not some otherworldly piety that was only concerned about spiritual matters. On the contrary, Christianity is decidedly materialistic—materialistic in the sense that material things matter. God made the material world and called it good. God entered into material, human flesh in the person of Jesus. So it is natural that we should pray for bread. Bread is the staff of life. It stands for food, in general, which we need to survive. We may not live by bread alone but we cannot live long without it. Bread not only stands for food, but for all the material things we need to get along in life: food, drink, shelter, clothes, even money (or bread or dough as we nickname it) to buy what we need to survive and thrive. Our faith is very down to earth in this respect.

The reading from Exodus illustrates God's willingness to provide God's people what they needed to live. After their dramatic rescue from Egypt, God sent manna—a bread-like flaky substance—as well as quail for them to eat. Reading on in the story we also learn that God provided water for them, too. So during this wilderness period, God made sure they had the basics. It might not have been gourmet fare. It might have been monotonous, but it worked. And it worked for forty years, which was how long it took to get from Egypt to the Promised Land.

So this petition about bread affirms that God cares about our physical needs. And we pray not just for bread but for *daily* bread. Our second word is *daily*. This word "daily" gets at

the issue of our total dependence on God. The Israelites had to learn this lesson during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. The way God designed it, God didn't dole out forty years' worth of food at once, not even a week's worth at once. The manna came every day, but only enough for that one day. The only exception was that on the sixth day, there was a two-day supply given. This was so the Israelites wouldn't have to gather it on the seventh day. The seventh day, the Sabbath, was a day of rest. Those who tried to store up more than a day's worth of manna soon found out that it couldn't be done. The manna spoiled. So morning by morning, they went out to collect enough just for that day. This was how they learned to trust God. It took two generations to instill this into them. It's not an easy lesson to learn.

Every day we have to wake up and trust that God will provide what we need for that day. Jesus tells us, "Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear . . . . Indeed your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. . . . Don't worry about tomorrow . . . ."i Anxiety about our future, worry that we won't have enough—enough money, enough time, enough "whatever"—is the opposite of faith. I've known people so eaten up by worry that it made them sick. I've known others who hardly had two dimes to rub together but lived the most peaceful and joyful lives because each day they trusted God to supply what they needed. Daily bread: it speaks of our need to rely each day on God's provision.

The third word in this petition that warrants our attention is the pronoun *us* and its companion, *our*. Just like "Our Father" reminds us that God belongs to more than just me, so "Give us our daily bread" reminds us that this prayer is about more than just my needs. It is impossible truly to pray for our daily bread without being horribly aware of the millions who didn't have bread yesterday, don't have any today, and are unlikely to have any tomorrow unless we do something.ii This prayer compels us to get off our knees and onto our feet throwing some extra jars of peanut butter into our grocery cart for our monthly food offering, or spending the night at church as an Interfaith Hospitality Network host for homeless families, or penning a letter to our politicians to encourage a more just global economy. How appropriate that the ecumenical soup kitchen our congregation supports is named, "Our Daily Bread." "Us" is a plural word. "Us" reminds us that we are our brother's and sister's keeper. We have a corporate responsibility.

St. Basil the Great was a fourth century bishop in Asia Minor. It seems he was a pretty blunt preacher. Listen to this bit from one of his sermons where he made explicit the idea that nothing that belongs to me is mine alone, particularly if I have more than I need.

The bread that is spoiling in your house belongs to the hungry. The shoes that are mildewing under your bed belong to those who have none. The clothes stored away in your trunk belong to those who are naked. The money that depreciates in your treasury belongs to the poor!iii

My bread is not mine to hoard. This little word "us" calls me to self-examination and action. It calls me to think beyond myself. It calls me to love my neighbors and to realize that I am responsible for their welfare. God's family is bigger than just me. I am part of "us."

Lastly we come to the word *give*. Give us daily bread. This is a reminder to us that our bread, our sustenance, our life itself is a gift from God. Everything we have is a gift from God. This view contrasts with the great American myth that we are independent and pull ourselves up

by our own bootstraps, that we possess everything by virtue of our own sweat and wits. But we don't come by boots, and muscles, and brain power by ourselves. They are given to us. We don't earn life and its blessings. By the wonderful illogic of God's grace they are simply given to us. Thus this prayer (Give us this day our daily bread) is not so much to inform God of our needs, or to coax a reluctant God to help us, as it is a profession of faith that God gives us gifts simply because God loves us. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus compares God to a parent. What parent when asked by a child for a slice of bread will give a rock? So God lovingly gives us all we need. Give us daily bread. Give us this day our daily bread.

I'd like to end with a Jewish tale which I think is fitting.<sup>iv</sup> I first heard it told by Syd Lieberman, a favorite at the National Storytelling Festival, a wonderful event every October in Jonesboro, Tennessee.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the Jews were expelled from Spain, they went all over--France, Germany, Greece. Some went to the Holy Land. Among them was Jacobi. He was a shoemaker, a simple, unlearned man but very devout. He would go to the synagogue every Sabbath and listen intently to what the rabbi was saying even though Jacobi spoke Spanish and the rabbi spoke Hebrew. But still he'd screw up his face and listen and listen, trying catch every word.

On one Sabbath the rabbi gave a sermon, and in it he mentioned how twelve loaves of bread were offered to God when the Holy Temple was still in Jerusalem.<sup>v</sup> Jacobi understood the word "bread" and he understood "God." He got so excited he ran home to his wife. "Esperanza," he said, "Guess what I found out? God eats bread! You are the best baker in the whole country. Make this week pan de dias and I'll bring it to God."

That week Esperanza kneaded in the best ingredients, put in her best intentions, and braided the bread with love. The next week Jacobi proudly carried twelve loaves to the synagogue. "Senor Dios," he said when he entered, "I've got your bread. You'll see, you'll love it. My wife, Esperanza, she's a wonderful baker. You'll eat every loaf, every crumb!" And with that he took the bread and put it into the holy ark, the special closet where the scrolls of the Torah are kept.

No sooner did he leave than in came the shammas, to sweep the floor and prepare the synagogue for the Sabbath worship. When his eye caught sight of the holy ark, he put down his broom and approached it. "Lord," he prayed, "I don't ask for much. You know I am not paid for being the shammas of the synagogue. I do this job out of love. But my children are hungry. I need food for them. Even if the people cannot pay me, perhaps you can feed my children, Lord."

It was then that the shammas noticed the enticing aroma of warm bread emanating from the ark. Impulsively, he took a step forward and opened it. Gasping, he exclaimed, "My Lord, a miracle! I knew You would feed my children! There are two loaves for each Sabbath meal and one for each of the other six days of the week. Oh, thank you, Lord, thank you so much!"

When the rabbi opened the ark in the Sabbath service Jacobi and Esperanza saw that there was no bread there. You should have seen the look of love that passed between them. The next week it was the same, and the week after it was the same. This went on for thirty years!

Then one day, Jacobi came to the synagogue with his load of bread. "Senor Dios, I know your bread's been lumpy lately. Esperanza's arthritis. Maybe you could do something? You'd eat better." Jacobi put the bread in the ark, and started to leave, when suddenly the rabbi grabbed him.

"What are you doing?" the rabbi demanded.

"I'm bringing God his bread." Jacobi replied.

"God doesn't eat bread."

"Well, he's been eating Esperanza's bread for thirty years."

Curious, the rabbi and Jacobi hid to see if they could figure out what was going on. No sooner did they hide than in came the shammas. He began to mutter, "I hate to bring it up, but you know your bread's been lumpy lately. Maybe you could talk with an angel." And he reached in to grab the bread, when suddenly the rabbi jumped out and grabbed him. The rabbi began to yell at the two men, telling them how sinful they were. He ranted on and on until all three men began to cry. Jacobi began to cry because he only wanted to do good. The rabbi began to cry because all of this had happened as a result of his sermon. The shammas began to cry because suddenly he realized there was going to be no more bread.

Over the sound of their weeping, the three men suddenly heard laughter in the corner. They turned. It was the great prophet Elijah. He was shaking his head and laughing. He said, "Oh rabbi, these men, these men are not sinful. These men are devout. You should know that God has never had so much pleasure as watching what goes on in your synagogue every week—one bringing the bread, the other taking it, and God getting all the credit."

Turning to the rabbi Elijah said, "Thirty years ago, you were an old, sick man and God had decreed that you would soon die. But since your teaching resulted in so much righteousness on the part of these people, God wanted you to live."

Then he turned to Jacobi. "Now that you know who is eating the bread, it will be more difficult to continue as you have for thirty years. But I want you to continue as you have, and believe with perfect faith that if you, Jacobi, bring your bread directly to the shammas, God will be pleased no less than before, for it is through acts of love and kindness that we serve God and repair the world."

"And you," the great prophet said to the shammas, "know that this bread was baked by Jacobi and Esperanza, but it comes from God, as well, because Jews are commanded to do the work of God in this world, feeding the hungry and binding the wounds of those who suffer."

And so, from that day on, Esperanza and Jacobi baked a dozen loaves of bread each Friday, as they had for three decades, and brought it to the home of the shammas, who gratefully accepted the loaves.

Give us this day our daily bread. Amen.

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i. Matthew 6:25, 32, 34

ii. N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 45.

iii. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 76.

iv. "Challahs in the Ark" <http://www.sydlieberman.com/recordings/index.php> on 7/21/16; <http://scheinerman.net/judaism/Stories/challot.html> on 7/21/16

v. See Leviticus 24:5-9