

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
10 October 2021

10:30 a.m. & 5:00 p.m. MT Worship
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“When Manna is the Main Course”

Final sermon in the 5-week series: *A Place at the Table*

Exodus 16:1-18

New Revised Standard Version

As we continue to explore what it means to have *A Place at the Table* in God’s kin-dom, it is fitting to look not just at *who* is at the Table but also at *what* is being served. What’s on the plate in front of us? What’s the main course? And how does it nourish us or feed us on our journey?

Take a moment and imagine your absolute favorite dish in the world. Maybe your grandmother’s apple pie, your grandfather’s biscuits, your mom’s lasagna, your husband’s grilled salmon, your wife’s mashed potatoes, your friend’s spinach artichoke dip, street tacos from the neighborhood food truck, or maybe just a perfectly scrambled egg – something only you can get exactly the way you like it. We have such an abundance and amazing variety of food in our daily diet, don’t we! And the access we have to this abundant variety of food is unreal too.

With grocery delivery at our fingertips and GrubHub ready to drop off our favorite sushi from the restaurant across town within minutes...we are spoiled by the fact that more often than not, we get to eat what we want, when we want it. We can customize dishes to meet our dietary needs; we can cut out sodium, stay away from gluten, only eat keto, be strictly vegan, or drink our proteins and greens in a shake, or even eat desert first if we want!

And even more, if we eat something we do not like or that’s not prepared to our liking, many of us can afford to toss it or try something different. We live in a “made to order,” “the customer is always right” culture.

But such choice has consequence.¹ “Here’s some “food” for thought from the Recycle Track System’s *Food*

¹ All food waste statistics taken from <https://www.rts.com/resources/guides/food-waste-america/>, accessed on October 10, 2021.

Waste in America Guide for 2021 (you can find it at [rts.com](https://www.wasteinamerica.com)): While the world wastes about 1.4 billion tons of food every year, the United States discards more food than any other country in the world: nearly 40 million tons (or 80 billion pounds) every year. That's estimated to be 30-40% of the entire U.S. food supply, and equates to 219 pounds of waste per person per year. That's like every person in America throwing more than 650 apples right into the garbage — or rather right into landfills, as most discarded food ends up there (over 1/5 of our landfills are full of food waste!)”²

And why this waste? Well, it's complicated but one reason is that we misunderstand expiration and sell by labels and toss perfectly good food in the trash, another reason is because compared to the rest of the world food is so plentiful here in the U.S. that we take for granted that we can throw away what we don't finish from one meal because we know where our next meal is coming from, and third because experts say we Americans are impulsive in our food purchases – we're not great

at assessing how much food is required for a situation or we buy food we never actually eat³ because heaven forbid we either run out of food at a party we're throwing or we don't provide adequate options for everyone. (I'm the worst at this, by the way!)

And get this – 43% of food waste in the U.S. comes from our homes! That's higher than all the other sources. 40% comes from restaurants, grocery stores and food service companies, 16% comes from farms, and only 2% comes from manufacturers – where too much food is produced.⁴ But we in our homes are responsible for 43%!

This waste matters because “before COVID-19, it was estimated that 35 million people across America (including 10 million children) suffered from food insecurity. That number is expected to increase to as much as 50 million people in 2021 due to the employment drop and financial fallout from the pandemic.”⁵ That's an increase of 15 million people in one year in one country! And globally, 9% of the population goes to

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

bed hungry each night – that’s 690 million people.⁶

Now I could preach a whole separate sermon on the disparities of food distribution and we should all care deeply that millions of people are hungry and starving and millions of people are well fed and wasteful. But today’s sermon will focus on another truth that is also compelling and important and that is, that I would venture to say that very few of us truly know when we are satiated or satisfied – we tend to eat too much or deprive ourselves by eating too little and we’ve forgotten what it feels like to just eat enough at just the enough times per day. There is a whole eating framework called Intuitive Eating⁷, which I encourage you to research and learn more about essentially it’s about listening to your body and mind for the natural hunger cues and satiation cues that we are created with.

Think about it – when we are infants, we intuitively know when we are hungry and we cry to receive food. And when we are full, we pull away and stop receiving food. But at some

point in our growing up, we start receiving different food messages and sometimes start equating emotions with food or behaviors with food or punishment with food or body type results with food...and we no longer eat because we are hungry or we need to nourish ourselves, but because of these cultural norms and expectations and sometimes shaming behaviors around food. We’ll force a food down that we hate because we’re told we can’t leave the table until we “clean our plate,” or we’ll take second portions on our plate at the holidays even though we are full because a well-intentioned relative insists, or we’ll skip meals because a coach says we need to lose weight.

All this to say – most of us really don’t truly know anymore what it means to eat to be satiated or satisfied...to eat the perfect amount – not too little to be deprived and not too much to be overstuffed. But just “enough.” The economy of God’s kin-dom operates with this value of “enough for all” – but we are far from that economy aren’t we? Life either leaves us wanting because we

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Definition from <https://www.intuitiveeating.org/definition-of-intuitive-eating/>, accessed on October 10, 2021.

feel that we don't have enough
 or we ourselves aren't enough
 OR life is just "too much for us
 to handle" because, well,
 everything is just "too much!"
 You see, what is true for food, is
 true for so many areas of our
 lives. Whether we're talking
 about our intake of social media
 or Netflix or sports, our insane
 hours at work, our drive to say
 'yes' to all the people who need
 us to do something, all the
 demands and joys of family life,
 or whatever it is – many of us
 struggle with either too much or
 too little in so many areas of our
 lives.

Physically and mentally we are
 exhausted by life, and,
 spiritually and emotionally, we
 are starved. We are starving for
 meaning and purpose and hope
 and a sense that our lives
 contribute to something greater
 than ourselves. And sometimes
 – especially when everything in
 life is NOT going as planned –
 we wonder if there is a God and
 if there is, where is that God
 when we need God? And I think
 this is because often we equate
 God's presence or God's
 provision in our lives as
 something that happens when
 things are going well. If life is
 good and I'm not suffering too
 much and things are going okay
 for me and my family – then

yeah, God is watching over me
 and my faith is strong. But the
 minute I'm stressed or that
 diagnosis comes or that tension
 with a family member sneaks
 back up or I lose my job or
 experience a tragedy or the
 world seems to be collapsing
 around me – well then, I wonder
 where is God and why isn't God
 doing for me what I need and
 want God to do? Distress causes
 doubt to creep in.

We've talked before about how
 God is not a vending machine.
 But it's worth being reminded
 of that again. You know, this is
 the idea where if we just put a
 little faith or the right words of a
 prayer into the proverbial
 "divine vending machine" as if
 it was "faith currency" and then
 picked out our desired prayer
 response from the selection of
 choices (B5 – cure my disease
 or D3 – make my son
 understand me or E6 – create
 world peace) – well then out
 would come our "answer to
 prayer" all wrapped up in a neat
 and tidy sealed package. But,
 that's NOT how God works. No
 matter how much we want God
 to work that way. No matter
 how much we yell at God and
 shake the divine vending
 machine – it's never gonna yield
 the pre-packaged answer we

want...because God is not a vending machine.

God is a Presence and a Provider and a Liberator and a Healer and a Guide and a Creator...but God is not a vending machine.

Of course, the Israelites didn't have vending machines back then. But you wouldn't know it from Exodus 16 would you?

Moses and Aaron have quite the complaining congregation on their hands. The people are hungry – genuinely hungry – and their hunger pains of the present bring on the powerful pull of nostalgia for the past. You know how sometimes you remember a time earlier in your life as “better” than it actually was because you block out the difficult parts and just think of the good parts because you’ve made it through that time and look how far you’ve come and it must not have been that bad because at least you knew what to expect even if things were difficult but NOW everything just seems complicated and different and unfamiliar? Nostalgia is about longing for what we know, longing for the

past or something as we remembered it to be (whether it was that or not). This is what the Israelites are engaging in right now – a little nostalgia indulgence.

Moses and Aaron are their leaders and remember, with God's guidance and provision, the people of Israel had just escaped the bonds of slavery under Pharaoh. This is an amazing, community-bonding, miracle of all miracles experience...and they experienced it together! And at first, with the plagues, the Passover meal, and the passage through the Sea behind them, it is time for celebration.

*“The songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15:1-21 are the epitome of communal praise and rejoicing. The people may not understand everything just yet. However, they are no longer in bondage and that is a reason to rejoice.”*⁸ Based on their song, and the tambourine dances, one would think that all is going pretty peachy!

“Yet almost before the praises [even] die down, reality sets in. The Israelites have no idea as to where they are, where they are

⁸ Alphonetta Wines, “Commentary on Exodus 16:1-18,” *Working Preacher* (Oct. 10, 2021), accessed on October 10, 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/god-provides-manna/commentary-on-exodus-16-18-3>.

going, how they will get there, how long the journey will last, or what life will be like when they get there.”⁹

Have you ever felt this way before? The moments of feeling all the sudden lost after a season of celebration are not uncommon. High school graduates throw big parties and celebrate their achievements and then all the sudden the next day, they awaken to the daunting reality that – oh my gosh, this means I have to be an adult and like go to school or get a job and figure out how to pay bills and stuff. I didn’t know how good it was to live under my parents roof and have food in the fridge! Or after a beautiful celebratory wedding day with the cake and the flowers and the dancing, the reality sets in the next day...oh – the wedding is a celebration, but marriage? Marriage, well, that’s kind of a challenge, isn’t it? The “whole lives together ‘til death do us part” sets in! Or maybe you retire and you have a big celebration and all your colleagues are there and you are so happy that you’ve made it to the end of your professional career and you feel good about all that you’ve done and you’re so thankful you don’t have to

wake up and do the 8 to 5 grind anymore, but then the next day you wake up and realize what do I do now? What is my purpose? You realize your identity was really tied up in what you did for a living and now you have to find a new path for living that looks vastly different than the previous 50 years have looked.

The Israelites are full of celebration until the reality of the wilderness sets in and they feel their hunger pangs and their lostness and disorientation.

It begs the question: Are the Israelites complaining only because they are physically hungry? It doesn’t seem so. Otherwise they would be good with the food that God provides them. They get all they can eat quail at night and in the morning they get this substance called manna – that buffet is not “all you can eat,” it’s called rather, “eat just what you need,” but more on that in a minute. The point is – their complaints have a yearning for the past in them...which is really a yearning NOT for their past enslavement but rather a yearning for what they KNEW and what they knew they could

⁹ Wines, *ibid.*

expect. There is an existential or spiritual/emotional hunger here there...it's not just a physical hunger.

Physical sustenance is one thing. Trusting God is a whole other thing. Would the Israelites understand the connection? Would they understand God's provision of daily manna from a lens of abundance or scarcity? If abundance, they would follow Moses's instructions exactly—no leftovers, gather just what you need. If scarcity, they would hoard to the point of rotting excess.”¹⁰ But of course, the concept of manna is that everything miraculously evens out on its own. Manna cannot be manipulated.

Manna must only be “enough” – and it must be “enough” for *everyone*. No more, no less. And yet – this “enough” is not without mystery...because the people do not recognize what it is that God is giving them.

The word manna derives from the question *man hu*, in the original language, which is actually a question meaning, "What is it?" The Israelites literally had no idea what was in front of them – they had never

seen it before. This was not the overflowing bread basket from Pharoah's pantry nor was it the unleavened bread from their Passover meal. This stuff was white and flaky and weird.

Scholars have all kinds of theories as to what manna actually was. There is a scientific/natural explanation that they've discovered. Manna is essentially a kind of bug juice. You probably didn't see that one coming...and neither did the Israelites!

“Apparently in the actual wilderness today where the wilderness of Sin was located back then, there is a type of plant lice that punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree... and then those same lice excrete a substance from this tree juice... it's a yellowish-white flake that can ball up... And this substance has a sweet taste. It's rich in carbohydrates and sugar. And it is there in the cool of the morning, but disintegrates in the warmth of the day. In fact, it has a tendency to attract ants if it hangs around too long. So the Bedouin [shepherds] who still live in that wilderness today... only collect a daily portion. And they actually bake it into a kind

¹⁰ Wines, *ibid*.

of bread, and guess what they call it? Manna.”¹¹

Now you may be saying, but Pastor Anne – you just took the miracle out of my manna! That’s no fun. But does manna have to come out of nowhere to be a miracle? “Maybe the miracle is that that God heard the complaining of the hungry people and God fed them with bug juice – with a food they would have never thought to eat themselves and that they didn’t even recognize as food!? Is the miracle the substance itself? Or is the miracle our ability to recognize the One who provides the substance for us?”¹²

Preacher Barbra Brown Taylor says, *“how you answer those questions has a lot to do with how you sense God’s presence in your life. If your manna has to drop straight out of heaven looking like a perfect loaf of butter-crust bread, then chances are you are going to go hungry a lot. When you do not get the miracle you are praying for, you are going to think that God is ignoring you or punishing you or—worse yet—that God is not there. You are*

*going to start comparing yourself to other people and wondering why they seem to have more to eat than you do... Meanwhile, you are going to miss a lot of other things God is doing for you because they [are hidden there in the] ordinary... If, on the other hand, you ARE willing to look at everything that comes to you as coming to you from God, then there will be no end to the manna in your life. A can of beans will be manna. Bug juice will be manna. Nothing will be too ordinary to remind you of God...”*¹³

You see, as they seek to find their place at the Table in this unknown land that is supposedly full of promises, the Israelites are learning that God feeds us with the ordinary stuff of life. God meets us in the ordinary and in the unrecognizable! They didn’t even know what manna was at first. How much stuff is right before us – on our plates – that we don’t even recognize as the stuff of God just waiting to be a miracle for us?

You see, “most of our spiritual journey won’t be Red-Sea-crossing, or Mt.-Sinai-

¹¹ Chris Fillingham, “Wilderness Cuisine,” *A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church* (Oct. 8, 2017), accessed on October 10, 2021 at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/576af7a6440243de>

[caa05eee/t/59df93c1beba49379ecdd3/1507824582435/2017-10-8+sermon+Exodus+16.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/576af7a6440243de).

¹² Fillingham, *ibid*.

¹³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, 10.

shattering, or Promised-Land-entering, kind of moments. Most of our encounters with God will happen in the low lands, traveling in-between... where we're not where we've been, and we're not exactly sure where we're going... and all we will be given is enough... for this day. Enough...for today. Can we see it? Will we recognize it?"¹⁴

Perhaps when we are in those unknown, flaky, sticky, unfamiliar places in our lives that is when we need to yearn for manna to be our main course. Because in gathering only what we need – no more, no less – and trusting that THAT will be enough (even when we don't even know what the THAT is) – we rely more on faith than on our own fears about what will be or won't be. Manna makes us let go of control. (No one said manna was easy to swallow!)

As Liz Wiseman, one of the top leadership thinkers in the world, says, *"There is power in the unknown."* Wiseman believes that knowledge is power, but *not knowing* brings about opportunity...which can be even

more important than power! Wiseman encourages us all to approach life with the viewpoint of a rookie: *"The best leaders are restless learners and perpetual rookies. They realize that it is not what you know that counts, it is how fast you can learn... We need to recognize that we tend to do our best work when we are on the outer edges of what we know, when we are doing something hard and new... There is a linear correlation: as challenges go up, so does our satisfaction. We are built for challenge."*¹⁵

Well, that's a good thing – because the challenges in life are quite big, aren't they? When life is overwhelming, or when situations are tense, how do we stay at our place at the Table when what is served is unrecognizable to us? When all we want to do is chunk the manna and call up mom for some homemade lasagna. Nothing like comfort food when you feel like complaining!

But maybe the key to it all lies in the main course itself – manna.

¹⁴ Fillingham, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Brian Brush, "The Power of Not Knowing," *Lumia Wealth* (Jan. 9, 2019), accessed on October 10, 2021 at <https://lumiawealth.com/the-power-of-not-knowing/>.

If manna literally means “*what is it?*” then could it be that to allow manna to be our main course in life means to allow a QUESTION to reside at the center of our plates, the center of our place at the Table, to allow a question to hover at the center of our spiritual hunger – instead of a pre-packaged answer from a non-existent vending machine God?

To have manna (*what is it?*) be our main course is to have Curiosity be the food that nourishes us, more so than complaint and even more so than celebration. What does it mean to be curious, spiritually speaking, about our life’s circumstances and how God is showing up in the midst of it all?

If Challenge creates Satisfaction in Leadership, as Liz Wiseman says, perhaps Curiosity creates Satiation in Spirituality, because being curious helps us stay at the Table longer – even when we don’t like or don’t recognize what is being served. And the longer we’re at the Table – the more opportunities we have to be fed...not just by the food on our plate, but by the stories and life experiences of those around the Table too. Manna was a community meal after all.

Maybe the real miracle of manna is that in those wilderness times when we want to be complaining about our life, manna invites us to be curious about our life instead. Nourishing us with a slow-simmering question, rather than a quick fix answer. What is it?

This week, try making manna your main course.

Trust that what is before you is enough and that what you do not recognize as food today, might just become the fortitude of faith that will get you through your tomorrow.

Amen.