

THE DIVINE POTLUCK

Scriptures: Exodus 16:1-5, 13-30; Luke 12:13-21

I came across this story in a Presbyterian news publication. A teacher in a private school asked her students to bring something from home that represented their religion. The next day one student came forward and said, "My family is Catholic, so I brought a crucifix." Another said, "My family is Jewish, so I brought a Star of David." A third said, "My family is Presbyterian, so I brought a casserole."

I think that is Biblical. All four gospels describe numerous occasions when Jesus had meals with people. The most famous was when 5000 uninvited guests showed up one day for dinner. The disciples wanted to send them away, but Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." So they had a potluck right there in the wilderness. There were no casseroles; apparently they weren't Presbyterians. But people shared what they had. They collected five loaves of bread and two fish, and out of it Jesus made a meal of it for everyone.

This was not the first time God fed people in the wilderness. Now turn to our second scripture lesson from Exodus 16 (OT, p. 62). The Israelites had just escaped from slavery in Egypt. They had crossed the Red Sea and now found themselves in the dessert with no food, still hundreds of miles from the promised land. They began to wonder if they would have been better off as slaves in Egypt.

Look at verse 4 on the top of page 63: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.'" Now look down at verse 16. Moses says, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person, according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" So they do. Verses 17-18: "The Israelites did so, some gathered more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed."

It was a divine potluck. I don't think we are to assume that everyone gathered only what they needed for themselves. They all went out and gathered, at least all of those who could, and then they brought it back to their tent and measured it out, an omer for each person.

By the way, I looked up the word "omer" in a Bible dictionary. It said that an omer is one-tenth of an ephah. Whatever an omer is, it is apparently the amount of bread or food that the average person would need for one day. And when everyone shared what they had gathered, there was an omer for everyone.

But now look at verses 19-20: "And Moses said to them, 'Let no one leave any of it over until morning.' But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them."

Do you see what is going on here? Some of the people are gathering extra bread and trying to save it for the next day. God has promised them enough bread for each person each day, but some are trying to create their own stockpile.

I can understand this. When it comes to money, I am by instinct a saver. I am putting away money in a retirement plan, more as I get older. I also put a certain amount of each paycheck into savings. Our church always keeps a certain amount of money in reserve, because you never know when we will need it, like during a recession. So I understand what the people of Israel are doing here. They are storing up some of their bread for a rainy day.

But it doesn't work. Those who try to stockpile their bread end up losing it.

There is a vivid parallel to this in our first scripture lesson. In Luke 12 Jesus tells a parable. He says,

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'

I find it interesting that the man in this parable never even considers sharing his excess with those who don't have enough. He could have said, "I've got more grain than my barns could ever store. I will give the excess grain to those whose crops have failed or to those who have no land on which to grow crops." Apparently that option never crossed his mind. Why? Is it because he is selfish and mean spirited? I don't think so. I think he is just worried about his retirement. In the next verse he says, "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

The sad thing about this parable is that the man could have been relaxing and eating, and being merry all along. God had blessed him with abundance. His barns were overflowing. But he could not enjoy it because he was too worried about building bigger barns and storing more grain so he could be financially independent. That is the key. The man is not profligate. He is not trying to buy a bigger house or a luxury car or a vacation condo in the Bahamas. He just wants bigger barns with more grain so that his future will be secure.

Doesn't that make sense? Doesn't it make sense for the people of Israel to save some of their bread, to store it up for a rainy day?

Yeah, it makes sense, but it does not work. In verse 20 God says to the man with the barns, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Friends, there is no security apart from God. It doesn't matter how much bread you try to save for the future; it will all become food for worms and so will we. It does not matter how big our barns are, or our savings accounts, or our retirement annuities. We are all dependent on God for every breath we take. We live by divine CPR. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches us to think

that way. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches us to pray for daily bread, because that is the only kind there is. Life is a gift we can never receive more than one day at a time.

I think recognizing this can help us relax. If you remember from the story in Exodus, on the sixth day God promised to give the people twice the amount of bread. Why? So that on the seventh day, the Sabbath Day, they could rest. What a gift! God not only gives us what we need to survive each day, but God also supplies us with enough so that once a week we can take a day off to enjoy it and remember who gave it to us.

Unfortunately, some people miss out on that gift, too. Exodus 16:27 says, "On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none." If on the sixth day people had gathered enough for two days, then why did some of them go out looking for bread on the seventh day? It's simple. They wanted to get ahead. It is the same idea as gathering extra bread and storing it up overnight. The people wanted to gather extra bread on the seventh day and save it so that they would feel more secure, so that they would not have to wonder every day whether God would give them their daily bread.

There are two tragedies in this story. The first is the inability of people to take time off to rest, to give thanks, to appreciate and enjoy the blessings that God has given us each day. Those who live in constant fear of the future cannot enjoy the blessings God has given us here and now.

The second tragedy concerns the effects of our actions on others. Think about this a moment. If God gives enough bread for each person each day, and if some of the people go out and gather extra bread, more than they need for each day, and try to store it, then some of the people will lack bread. It may be that some were reducing their own daily portion of bread in order to save some for the future. We call that delayed gratification, and that is a good thing unless you are talking about a basic necessity of life. More ominous, however, is the possibility that some were storing bread for the future while others did not have enough bread for that day.

Here is another side to the Lord's Prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray for *our* daily bread, not just mine. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we are saying that the bread God gives us, the blessings of life that God entrusts to us, are not for us alone. You are not here just to take care of yourself or even just to take care of your family. You are here to help God provide daily bread for others. That's what this story from Exodus implies. You are part of a divine potluck. The bread that you gather, the work you do, is part of God's provision for the world.

I am a saver, and I know many of you are, too. But the truth is that daily bread is the only kind of bread there is. Life is a gift we receive from God one day at a time. When we remember that, it makes us less anxious about the future and more able to enjoy what God has given us today and share it with others.

- Ken Onstot
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