

Manna for the Journey

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

We meet some kindred spirits in our readings today. The Israelites are in the midst of their journey through the wilderness. They're complaining. They're hungry. The Lord hears their cries and sends them manna from heaven, enough for each day. When it comes, they don't know what it is. They ask Moses, "What is it?" And that, in fact, is what the word manna means in Hebrew: "What is it?"

Over the course of my life I have been fortunate not to starve, except for once. I was journeying through the wilderness of Europe on \$1.50 a day in 1979. I was trying to find some peanut butter. You couldn't buy it in the stores there at that time. I went to the American army base in Heidelberg Germany and started knocking on doors. One family was moving. They were trying to get rid of their food and gladly gave me their opened jar of peanut butter. I ate for a week. What is it? That peanut butter was manna from heaven on my wilderness journey.

The interim process in a congregation is not unlike a wilderness journey. And like our kindred spirits the Israelites, we too receive manna for the road. What is it? That manna for this day is our second reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. What remarkable, extraordinary food for us as we ponder identity and purpose and navigate toward the next faithful step, the next chapter for this beloved community called St. John's. Some of today's manna is tough to chew and hard to swallow. It challenges us to look inward and if you're like me, when you look inward you don't always like what you see.

My spiritual formation Bible says "Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us of the importance of roots. The health of a tree is dependent on the health of its root system. Roots reach deep into the soil to draw up the necessary nourishment to sustain the tree. Deep roots create stability and help the tree withstand the storms of life. Likewise, when we are rooted in the powerful and boundless love of Jesus, we are prepared to face the challenges of living in a stormy world."ⁱ That's good food for this journey.

Paul begs us today to "live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called." Then he paints a picture for us of what living into that calling looks like. How are we doing?

- Are we living with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?
- Are we aware of the gifts God has given us? Are we cultivating them?
- Are we equipping others for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ?
- Are we speaking the truth in love?
- Are we joined and knit together by every ligament with which we are equipped, with each part working properly, promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love?

How are we doing? In *The Message*, Paul says it this way: "I want you to get out there and walk – better yet, run! – on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline – not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences."

I have heard comments now and then that the church is a business. It certainly is. And what *is* its business? The business of the church, to summarize all that Paul just said, is relationships: relationships with God and with one another, and inviting others into those relationships through faith. If we are not making that a priority, we're not unlike the shoe business I heard about. It focused on its building, its budget, hiring the best CEO and staff and recruiting the board of directors, and – oops! – it forgot to make shoes! Sometimes we avoid that business of relationships because living in those relationships can be such a challenge. It's just more comfortable to focus on the other things. They are important. No question. And yet it's through those relationship challenges that we come to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ!

I'm reminded of what Jo Gantzer, who was on staff here several years ago, once told me. "The church is like a rock polisher. We come in rough, and through our bumping up against one another, over and over, we become smooth." That's how maturity develops – if we consent. Our default inclination, and what our culture supports, is immaturity: to judge *others* by their worst *behaviors*, while we judge *ourselves* by our best *intentions*.ⁱⁱ

I'm told there is plenty of food to feed everyone in the world. The issue is delivery. How do we get the food to hungry people everywhere? So how do we deliver this manna Paul gives us today, to a starving world? How might we do this work of building up the body of Christ with humility and discipline – not in fits and starts, but steadily? How do we make shoes?

The way I know is to collectively commit to an intentional, on-going process of adult faith formation, rooted and grounded in our worship life, that inspires and equips us for maturity in Christ. Maturity is so counter-cultural now. It's hard to find, and our world is starving for it. And yet in Christ, it's ours to have and to share. It's the manna the world needs. Now more than ever. Such a regular, on-going process of faith formation triples as an opportunity for renewal for you, serves as an on-ramp for newcomers starving for a better way to navigate in our stormy world, and forms leaders for the church. We're going to explore such a possibility in an open conversation from 11:15-noon today and see where it goes. Please join us.

We started a process like this at the church I served for ten years in Livonia. It built upon everything I learned about Adult Formation when I was on staff here before. I was thinking being with you again would give me an opportunity to give back. We called the process *GPS: ancient faith to navigate a modern world*. Some churches call it "The Way." Maybe it should be called "Manna." The question, "What is it?" is exactly what the process is about. What is the Christian life about? The process starts with a period of inquiry, where everyone gets to ask whatever burning questions they have. You meet people exactly where they are. It moves into deeper exploration, leading eventually to baptism or affirmation of baptism, followed by a focus on serving out of our gifts in the world. Having a process like this in place gives the rector a steady vehicle to help connect people to God and each other.

I received a note from a young mother who showed up in that Livonia church one Sunday in 2012 with her young son. This is part of what she wrote: *I started a journey thinking it was solely for my son, only to find out it was for me in so many ways. You helped me start that journey. I remember that Sunday over a year ago while sitting in church, feeling so lost and alone. You came up to me and said, "There's a Monday night GPS class. I think you should come." A simple invitation and a gentle push from you was all I needed. Although I don't know where I'm going, I know that I am not lost and definitely not alone.* In that congregation's June newsletter of this year there was an appeal from this very mother, who is now a leader in the congregation, to help with a service project.

This kind of transformation was possible because the people of the congregation took their call to do the business of the church seriously: to make shoes – to systematically equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. I left that church almost four years ago and the process is still going strong. Twenty-eight people went through it this past year. It did not depend on me alone. The people owned it and now their new pastors are involved and supporting it.

In our Gospel today Jesus says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. There's such a temptation right now in our culture to go for the food that perishes: for what's flashy, what's charismatic, what's entertaining, what makes us feel good for the short term. But that's not what the business of the church is about. You can have cut flowers that look beautiful. They'll inevitably wither. You can spray paint the flowers to make them look good again. Or, you can chew on the manna we're given today and focus on the health of your root system, growing perennials that come up every year regardless of who your rector is, and with a nod toward bearing fruit down the road.

In the meantime, as our wilderness journey continues, we complain like the Israelites, and we exercise patience and bear with one another in love. God still meets us exactly where we are, as we are, in love, and feeds us, week in and week out, with that holy manna. What is it? Bread and wine, the Bread of Life that gives life to the world, Jesus our Savior. Like my friend in Livonia, we may not know yet where we are going, but we know we are not lost and definitely not alone. Amen.

Pastor Dana Runestad

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ⁱ The Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV), Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Publishing House, 1999, p. 1540

ⁱⁱ Paraphrased from a speech by President George W. Bush, July 12, 2016, at the Police Memorial Service following the shootings in Dallas, TX