

Hungry for Rest

Menno Mennonite Church
September 20, 2016

Purpose: To affirm the discipline of sabbath as an extension of God's provision.

Message: As powerful as our hungers are, we are invited into God's way of trust in providing our needs.

Scripture: Exodus 16:2-15 (I will read); Matthew 20:1-6 (Please read)

Synopsis: It can be hard to be civil when we are hungry. Studies around malnutrition as well as the difficult lived experience of many have borne witness to the fact that when you are hungry—really hungry—it eclipses everything else. When Israel finds themselves in the desert, away from everything that they have known, they find their hunger as their primary concern, so much so that they contemplate if slavery might be better. God meets them in this place too and not only provides what they need, but invites them into trusting that provision as something that they can even rest within. Sabbath invites us into resting on God's provision as an exercise of trust, faith and hope. How might we lay aside our hungers and into what God is doing?

Connected article: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/10/hunger>

Exodus 16:2-15 (CEB)

The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert.

³ The Israelites said to them,
 “Oh, how we wish that the Lord
 had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt.
 There we could sit by the pots cooking meat
 and eat our fill of bread.
 Instead, you’ve brought us out into this desert
 to starve this whole assembly to death.”

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses,
 “I’m going to make bread rain down from the sky for you.
 The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day.
 In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction.

⁵ On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected,
it will be twice as much as they collected on other days.”

⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites,
 “This evening you will know that it was the Lord
 who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

⁷ And in the morning you will see the Lord’s glorious presence,
because your complaints against the Lord have been heard.
Who are we? Why blame us?”

⁸ Moses continued,
 “The Lord will give you meat to eat in the evening
 and your fill of bread in the morning
 because the Lord heard the complaints you made against him.
 Who are we? Your complaints aren’t against us but against the Lord.”

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole Israelite community, ‘Come near to the Lord, because he’s heard your complaints.’ ”

¹⁰ As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

¹¹ The Lord spoke to Moses,

¹² “I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them,

‘At twilight you will eat meat.

And in the morning you will have your fill of bread.

Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.’ ”

¹³ In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp.

And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp.

¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted,

there on the desert surface were thin flakes,

as thin as frost on the ground.

¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?”

They didn’t know what it was

There are a few things that focus the mind like hunger. Even being a bit picky can put you out of sorts in ways that are hard to define. In our house around supper time it is not unheard of to have a pre-supper snack if for no other reason than to snap someone out of a non-actual bad mood loop. A little hunger makes life hard. A lot of hunger can make things almost impossible. Gratefully few of us have known deep hunger. But perhaps we have known people who have experienced hard times or we have known people who have gone through times of scarcity in our generations past. Without knowing it first hand it can be hard to know what full hunger can do to the person and their ability to function.

Part of the experience during World War II was anticipating the conditions that would come once the war ended. There was a need to know how to best recover people from years of starvation diets. Recruits from the Civilian Public Service program were enrolled into a study at the University of Minnesota where they were carefully and clinically malnourished over the course of 6 months to the point where they had lost about 25% of their previous body weight, and then given different rehabilitation diets for the following 6 months. Along with the physiological and dietary data, there was a huge amount of psychological and sociological observations recorded. The study noted that during the time of the study the participants were almost consumed with the consideration and the notion of food. Meals were protected and defensive, with a good deal of anxiety and anxiousness about the food that they had and the food they saw going to waste. Some of these impacts remained with the study participants for the remainder of their lives. Generally, the takeaway was that when one is hungry for food, and the provision of food is practically all that an individual can be concerned with, almost without exception. This remains one of the seminal works about starvation in the psychological field as it is among the last studies conducted. Further replication is thought unethical.

With this in mind, is there little wonder why the newly released slaves of Egypt would find themselves in the desert in the midst of complaint? What good is freedom, they argued, if there was not food (we had already visited the issue of water just before this). You can almost hear the grumblings and bickering as the unleavened bread ran short and then ran out entirely. They had accepted that they were there to die—they just were now wondering why they went to do so in such an uncomfortable fashion. I am rather inclined to think kindly of the Israelites found in such a circumstance. We can easily judge them for their lack of faith, and take notes as they fail to follow instructions, collect too much and find the consequences for it. Our reading

stops short of this, but we know it well, and it doesn't take a huge amount of imagination to place ourselves in such a circumstance doing exactly the same thing. As the study shows, people will do what they must when food and the life that represents is on the line. This is not a story of people being unfaithful as much as it is one of people being people, and God being God. Theologically speaking bearing in mind who we are when we are hungry and who God is in light of human need is always illuminating.

Because we need to note this of God's provision: God hears and God responds. From the desert to now God continues to be responsive the realities of human suffering. This is an article of faith that we cannot lay aside, even when people might question it in the present circumstance, what ever they might be today. It is one of the most terrible questions about the goodness of God: if God is good, why does hunger remain? It is a question that cannot be answered with anything but a deep sigh and a nod of complete understanding. It is an indictment that sticks, and is not easy to speak to.

We need to present the evidence that does exist and has existed for generations. There are people whose life work and passion is singularly providing food that people might eat, doing their absolute best to produce as much as the world can take. Yes it is a business, but also yes it is a calling and cannot be separated one from the other. It is part of how God provides. What's more there is time, money and capacity thrown into the simple work of doing what we can, what ever we can, to ensure that the food is distributed well and fairly. God meets us not just on the spiritual plain but the physical as well. We are just not that good at calling out God's provision because it often comes in the ways and shapes that we do not recognize. Human sin intervenes in God's provision and can obscure and break it. We would much rather rely on our ability to provide rather than on the nature of there being enough. How much better off would we be were we able to lay aside our hungers long enough to understand that there is enough to share. Many times we too need to wonder what God is giving it (as is the name of Manna) to make sense of it in our world.

Second we need to take note of how God provides here. It is hard to ignore the statement YHWH gives that this will test their ability to listen. God's provision comes. What we do with it and how we understand it is a different matter. The particulars of the schedule and how it is delivered to preserve that which is sacred is calling them into next level trust. For a people accustomed to the demands of slavery and production on everyone's schedule but their own, that

was a big thing to learn. That rest is possible. That they can stop working. That God will provide what they need, though never more than what they need. It is part of the training program that God is trying to implement that what comes from God is enough, as it always is, and striving beyond that is a fool's errand. It is a demanding thing to expect provision, and there is little wonder that the first steps were missteps.

Ultimately, this is a story about Sabbath. Though we are not keyed to seeing it. Usually, we see Sabbath as an obligation, another must of what we must do and how we must behave. Another demand of an angry God or angry parents: take your pick. We adopt an attitude that Sabbath is a punishing time, a time where we HAVE to follow the rules, or else. It is a giant time out, and we are naughty children. I am sure we can all sit around and swap stories either from our childhoods or those of our parents of the laws and regulations that Sabbath is often most readily associated with. But that is not what it is, really. Sabbath is wilderness time. It is time to withdrawal, to get off the hamster wheel that we so often feel we live on and walk away from the assumptions of empire and its demands on life, and to see what is provided us in the space in between. Sabbath is meant to be a gift, not a burden. It's time for play. It's a time for joy. Historically, Sabbath was recommended by rabbis as the ideal time for couples to make love. It is time to open ourselves to the possibility of the bread we most need being provided us, not by our own ingenuity and effort, but by the hand of the one who meets us in wilderness. Sabbath is God's good gift of time, of play, and provision of all that we need, reminding us that the world in which we reside, and the rules by which we normally play is not, ultimately, our lives fully lived, nor our responsibilities fully realized.

The purpose of Sabbath keeping is to purposefully, intentionally, giving us a different quality of time. It's about allowing ourselves to rest away from the fear that there will never be enough: of us, of our abilities, of stuff to go around, of God to provide what we need. The invitation of Sabbath is to taking the opportunity to receive the gift of God's provision, a provision that is adequate to meet us where we are at, and to do so as a regular practice of hopefulness and openness. But it won't be done for us. We no longer have the societal supports to force us to it. The days of the closed retail culture and socially mandated rest period are dead on gone. But that makes it all the more important. Keeping Sabbath, resting in provision, is risky and countercultural. It takes an active boundary that needs to be maintained to intentionally take this time and make it into what it is called to be, however we find to take that. It is about

declaring enough and resting in enough. We value our ability to exceed our own boundaries to make things happen. Our story from Exodus is full of boundaries. Gather only so much, about 3.5 liters/person/day five days and gather twice as much on the sixth. The consequence of not maintaining those boundaries? It bread worms, and stink and chaos. In a phrase, without boundaries, life stinks. Without resting in God we are doomed to fail in finding what we need.

Sabbath keeping is about much more than purity and self-righteousness. Its about taking a break from that which is normal, that which is anxiety building, that which is stressful. Maybe our Sabbath ritual today is to refrain from the news just for a day, and allow ourselves to luxuriate in not worrying about the world, just for a while. Maybe it is a time to take a break from the technology that is continuously keeping us in touch, and placing ourselves on a 24 hour plane ride—out of touch and off the grid. Maybe it is a Sabbath from the shaping images of empire that would have us buy, consume, and dispose, and relieve ourselves from the space that this occupies in our lives. What ever it is, we need to observe Sabbath, and take to ourselves the alternative order of the day when we can allow space for God's spirit to speak to us, to move within us, and activate us for new life coming out of wilderness.

Whatever we do, know this: it is God who provides, it is God who feeds. We can rest in that goodness, knowing that we will be met and fed. My we rest in God's good gifts, now and always. Amen.