

A Sermon for DaySpring

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A Pilgrimage of Trust

Matthew 20:1-16

September 20, 2020

When Christians pray, we often turn together to the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Having seen his devotion to the Father early in the morning, late at night, in times of trouble and in times of joy, they turned to him, 'Teach us to pray'. He said, "When you pray, say this..." And he taught them what we call the Lord's Prayer.

One of the supplications in the brief prayer is this: Give us this day our daily bread.

That simple appeal is rooted in trust in God who provides, a God we can believe in, who will be trustworthy. We do not just toss this prayer up into the wind, but lay it, alongside all we need for today, on the altar of the holy, loving One.

Give us this day our daily bread.

In today's scripture readings, we have two stories about the struggle for and gift of daily bread. They are two of the fascinating stories of grace in the Scriptures.

Jesus' parable from Matthew isn't exactly about bread, but a day's wage, which is the subject of the controversy in the story, is what workers are paid today to provide their food for tomorrow. In the parable, an argument breaks out over who should be paid how much for how much work. In the story, a vineyard owner hires groups of workers throughout the day to work in the vineyard. At quitting time, he lines them up to get paid. Everyone gets the same amount, from the workers hired to work only at the very last hour of the day to those who had been laboring since early in the morning.

Jesus begins this parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like this story . . ."

How so? The kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a vineyard who is so obsessed with hiring every possible person that he trolls the marketplace until the end of the day looking for anyone he can hire. He is so outrageously generous that he overpays almost all his workforce. Those who were unexpectedly overpaid were delighted in their good fortune. Each of them spent some portion of the day before they were hired, worrying about what they would eat tomorrow. Even by the end of the day, they had no reasonable expectation lining up for pay, that they'd be given a whole day's wages. It's as if the vineyard owner values their lives more than their output. The kingdom of heaven is like that, like a God who relates to his people with lavish generosity of grace whenever they come, whether it is early or late. All are given daily bread.

As you would expect, because you know the nature of humans, because you are one, not everyone shares the joy of those who came later in the day. Those who toiled all day—who earned their pay, seeing the generosity lavished on those who only worked part of the day had already done the math by the time they came to the front of the line and figured this guy was

paying bonuses to everyone. Imagine their disappointment when he puts a single denarius in their hands just as they'd been promised. A day's work for a day's wage. Everyone gets their daily bread. How you feel about that has everything to do with your attitude toward it, what you think you deserve and what you receive.

Justice in the presence of generosity did not breed happiness. They grumbled, "We've been cheated!" The owner replied, "No you haven't. You've been given what you deserved. Do you begrudge my generosity?"

It seems like a lot of Jesus' parables come back to this theme in one way or another. The kingdom of heaven is like lavish generosity to people who don't deserve it even in the face of withering criticism from those who have earned it. It is like valuing a person's life for more than their output. And it is like grace that seeks and seeks and seeks, like a shepherd for a lost sheep, a woman for a lost coin, a father for a prodigal son, like a party where everyone is invited from the highways to the hedges. It is abundant grace. To live in the way of God made known and made possible by Jesus is to live with a spirituality of abundance, set free from an attitude of resentment or a spirituality of scarcity. We ultimately do not live on what we deserve. We live on the gifts of good, lavish, reckless love. Or else, we live angry, disappointed, and resentful. These two paths are set before us in life.

In our second story, from Exodus, we see a group of people who were full of resentment. In their fear of scarcity, their prayer for daily bread was literally for what they would eat today. "There's no food out here," they said. "We're going to die." It's not an unreasonable concern when you're in the desert wilderness. There's really isn't much to eat out there, not much to hunt or gather, and since you're on the move, no time to grow it. And no one to buy it from if you had means to buy food. This is the original food desert. "What are we going to eat?" they said.

Like the early morning workers from the parable, they did not have a spirituality of abundance and they did not trust God to provide for them even though they had just experienced divine protection and provision in abundance. God had delivered them from slavery, protected them from the Egyptian army, seen them through the parting of the sea, provided water to drink, and now, after all of that (isn't this so much like humans?) they say: "well, what about food? Oh no, we're doomed. Why did you bring us out here to die! We might as well have died in Egypt when everything was so great." Amazing how quickly our memories change.

God will not abandon his people, but they can't see that yet. In their suffering, in their fear, they can't see what seems so plainly obvious to us who look in from the outside. God will not abandon his people. The next day and for every day after that for all their wilderness wanderings, God provided daily food they called "manna." Manna was new to them that first morning. They'd never seen anything like this before, appearing on the ground like dew. They went out of their tents in the morning, looked around on the ground around them and said, "What is it?" Moses said, "That's your daily bread. That's what the Lord has given you to eat." In kind of a humorous move, from then on, they called it what they first said about it: "what is it?": Manna.

What is it? It is bread to eat when you are hungry, it is the promise of God made new every morning to never leave you nor forsake you. It is grace given to you, you didn't earn it make it produce it, grow it. You are *given* it. It is life. It is hope for another day. And it is daily reminder that God provides, maybe not always in the way we thought it would be, but enough. God provides enough. We live in the presence of a God of compassion and love who asks us to trust him for daily bread when we can't see around the next corner.

For all time Israel would struggle with this. This is the heart of their life with God over all those years: the struggle to trust God in all things when you can't see the future. Manna in the wilderness was a generation-long training in trusting God for daily bread. Jesus will echo this trusting of God when he asks: Why do you worry about tomorrow? Don't you see that God's sees the sparrow; God certainly sees you. God sees everything about you. God knows the burdens you're carrying. God knows the troubles the experiencing. God knows the prayers that you lift and the prayers you can barely lift high enough. God knows you. Why do you worry about tomorrow? Don't you know that you are held in the arms of a compassionate God?

For Christians, the Eucharist restores us to a spirituality of abundance that helps us overcome attitudes of fear and scarcity that haunt us. When we come to the table, we learn to receive with open hands and to give with open hands, and from there, we learn to give and share with the same open hands. It a life-time forming of a people that trust God to receive and to give. We receive and give the bread we break at communion, and then everything entrusted to us without remainder.

The vineyard owner demonstrates this spirituality of abundant generosity. Out of his abundance, we assume, but it also may be out of his own scarcity. But out of whatever life had given to him, he provides for everyone he can in a day and trusted tomorrow to tomorrow.

St. Paul models the same spirit. In Philippians, writing from prison, Paul reflects on life as this gift to be received and given, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." And he encourages us, "live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ". In success and suffering, not knowing whether tomorrow will bring his freedom or his death, the Apostle sees everything as gift to be received and to be graciously given—even the breath in his body. We live in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ when we live open handed like this toward God, toward one another, toward the stranger, toward all that we need and all we have to give.

The kingdom of heaven is like a story of people receiving and sharing daily bread, breaking bread together and giving to all who have need. The name of that story is Church, and it is where we learn to receive by grace and to give in abundance. It is where we learn to walk in a pilgrimage of trust on the earth. And where we remember God's mercies await us each morning, in ways both simple and surprising. We just have to keep our eyes and our hearts open to God—a God made known in the great stories of grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.