

Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11  
John 4:5-42

In this season of Lent, we are looking at the distress that people are experiencing in our society today. Today, I want us to consider economic distress. Companies are eliminating older people who are nearing retirement and replacing them with younger, cheaper workers. It is much more difficult for these older workers to find jobs, and finding one that paid what they were getting is even more difficult. That has happened to some of our own church members. Back in 2012, there were 10.6 million people in America considered the “working poor;” people living in poverty despite being a part of the labor force. America has a larger share of low-wage jobs than any other developed nation in the world. America is becoming a low-wage nation. The American dream that our children will have it better than us may disappear, if they have not already. There is distress about personal economic viability, and it seems to be getting worse. Israel’s experience in the wilderness has something to say about economics.

After the Pharaoh freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, it took forty years to make the trek back to Israel, back to the land that God promised them. It wasn’t because they were slow walkers. Those forty years was a time for their formation as the people of God. It was a transition from their slavery and dependence upon Pharaoh to freedom and dependence upon God. In our particular story from Exodus this morning, the people are in the wilderness. They complain because there is no water. God gave Moses instructions on how to find some water. We find a number of stories like this called murmuring stories, because the people murmured, complained about their situation during their forty years. These incidents were to train the Israelites to depend upon God. They were to teach them that God would take care of them, to trust God.

One significant story is that of the manna. God would send a bread-like substance onto the ground every morning. Manna comes from the Hebrew word which means, 'What is it?' Each day they were to collect enough for just that day. If they collected too little, they still had enough. If they collected too much, the manna would spoil and smell to high-heaven by the next day. It became like "the dead skunk in the middle of the road stinking to high heaven." There was a different rule concerning the Sabbath day, which was Saturday. On Fridays, the Israelites were to collect a two-day's supply, thus not having to work on the Sabbath. Whatever manna was kept over Friday night for Sabbath consumption did not spoil. They were to trust God for daily bread.

The Old Testament Walter Brueggemann suggests that there some important points about manna that speak to money and possessions, to economic viability.

First, the story declares that there is enough for everyone, but it must be shared. God had told them to gather as much as each of them needed, an omer, which was a unit of dry measure, for each person. The Israelites gathered, some gathering more, some gathering less. But, when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered more had nothing over, and whoever gathered little had no shortage. This story affirms that God provides an abundance that it is more than adequate. But, BUT, we have to share.

Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to share. The church in Jerusalem had fallen on hard times Paul was collecting money for these poor Christians. This was a major project for Paul and he discusses the project in at least three of his letters. Paul does not coerce the church to give, as that would violate the act of self-giving abundance. Nor does he ask for excessive self-giving, even though Christ gave of himself excessively. Paul asks for "a fair balance between your present abundance and

their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.” He concludes his argument with an appeal to the manna story, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” Christians are to share.

A teacher asked a small boy a question: "If you have two apples, and I ask for one, how many will you have left?" Without hesitation, the boy replied: "Two." This is not mistaken mathematics, but a basic mistaken attitude toward life: What's mine is mine, and sharing is an option.

Another point of the manna story is that the gift food was not to be stored. God’s gift is not to be hoarded. When the Israelites tried to hoard the manna, “it bred worms and became foul.” Hoarding comes from a paradigm of scarcity. Generosity, sharing, comes from a paradigm of abundance. It comes from an understanding that God has given enough, more than enough, for everyone, as long as we share. But, hoarding comes from a paradigm of scarcity. To live by a paradigm of scarcity leads to hoarding. There is not enough so I am going to make sure I get my share, more than my share. Hoarding comes from being worried that one does not have enough. “Worry belongs to a practice of accumulation paralleled by a fear of scarcity,” as Dr. Brueggemann points out. Hoarding is antithetical to a Christian understanding that God has provided enough for everyone. As Christians were are to live by a paradigm of abundance, a paradigm of God’s generosity, not by a paradigm of scarcity.

A Ruffles potato chip ad shows two Inuits sitting in the midst of a vast, uninhabited, frozen waste. One is sublimely scarfing down his bag of Ruffles, while the other drools longingly in his direction. In reply to the request for a chip, the first man

declares to his lone companion, "But if I gave one to you I would have to give one to everybody." Then the Ruffles slogan: "So good you'd better get your own bag!" Nacho Cheese Doritos employs comedian Jay Leno as their philosopher-spokesperson. After extolling the chips' great flavor and radical crunch, Leno gives Doritos eaters free rein: "Crunch all you want ... we'll make more!" Christian theology is abundance, not scarcity, more Nachos than Ruffles.

Are we a society of sharing, or a society of hoarding? The wealthiest 1% own 40% of the nation's wealth; the bottom 80% own 7%; the richest 1% in the United States now own more additional income than the bottom 90%. The gap between the top 10% and the middle class is over 1,000%. The average employee needs to work more than a month to earn what the CEO earns in one hour. Since 2009, when the recovery allegedly started, 95% of the economic gains went to the top 1% net worth. Eight rich people, six of them Americans, own as much combined wealth as half of the human race!

If we claim to be a Christian nation, then, may I ask? Where are these Christian values of sharing, generosity? What does the story of manna have to say about the increasing divide between the poor and the rich? What does it have to say about the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, and the disappearing middle class? What does it have to say about the hoarding of wealth by the one percent? In our socio-political context of distress, we need to think in terms of abundance and sharing, and less on scarcity and hoarding. What is it going to be, Nachos or Ruffles?

Hosanna in the highest!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.