



“Daily Manna”
Sermon Preached by Anne Ledbetter
Sunday, May 15, 2011
Scripture – Exodus 16:13-18

Today’s passage involves a scene from the Exodus story, when Moses has led the Hebrews out of Egypt and their sojourn through the wilderness begins. The Red Sea victory party is hardly over before the people, sounding rather childish, start to complain, “What shall we drink?” Moses turns to the Lord, who directs him to water. Next they whine about hunger, second guessing their decision to follow Moses, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Do we detect a note a melodrama or what?

God hears the people’s moaning and tells Moses and his brother Aaron that food is on the way – God will shower them with food, indeed rain down bread from heaven for them. And God does indeed provide: quails fly into the camp at evening and they have meat. And in the morning, they discover a fine flaky substance when the dew has lifted. “What is it?” they said to one another. What is it, indeed! Hebrew for “what is it” is man huh, and thus the substance got its name, manna.

Scholars generally believe that this manna is the same stuff Bedouin gather today in the Sinai Peninsula and bake into bread. The flakes come from the plant lice that feed on the local tamarisk trees. The bugs have to eat lots of the sap because it is poor in nitrogen. They excrete the extra in a yellowish-white flake or ball of juice from the tree that is rich in carbohydrates and sugars. It decays quickly and attracts ants, so a daily portion is the most anyone gathers....ⁱ Which brings us to the instruction Moses issued from God, “gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person” and they gathered as much as each of them needed, which, when measured amounted to an omer per person.

How much is an omer, you say? Well, an omer is 1/10 of an ephah. And how much is an ephah? Oh, well, an ephah is equal to 72 logs. And the size of a log? Okay, okay. Archaeologists’ best guess is that an omer is 3.6 liters – just under two large soda bottles.ⁱⁱ In other words, they were knee deep in manna, and everyone ate plentifully, satisfying their hunger, some consuming more, some eating less, but averaging out to one omer per person.

Our story delivers simple and salient wisdom for God's people – God provides us with what we need, daily manna. Moreover, God does not want us to waste resources. What happened when they had leftover manna? It spoiled and bred worms. The intent was to gather enough for every person but only what was needed. This nugget of ancient wisdom calling us to consider what we need versus what we want or desire, rests in many cultures and religions.

Many Native Americans understood the sacred nature of creation – and their responsibility to live in harmony with the earth and other living things. The Sioux and other plains Indians would thank the Great Spirit after killing a buffalo, and proceed to use every portion of the animal for food, clothing, shelter and material needs. To this day Inuit people revere and respect the bowhead whale and use every ounce of the huge mammal for daily sustenance.

What about us? Do we gather and consume our allotted portion of God's gifts, of daily manna? In America we eat 815 billion calories of food each day – roughly 200 billion more than we need, or enough to feed 80 million people. Our average daily consumption of water per person is 159 gallons, while more than half the world's population lives on just 25 gallons a day.ⁱⁱⁱ When I backpacked through Europe after college, I was shocked at having to insert a coin, and pay for shower at a pensione! The coin did not even guarantee me hot water, but it did buy three minutes in which to shower, and wash and rinse hair as well! Had Keith and I installed coin operated showers in our house when we moved here, I daresay it would financed at least one child's college education!

A church member has shared with me that she cannot stand to see people waste water. In conversation I learned that she religiously turns the faucet off as she puts her toothbrush in her mouth, and never lets a tap run but uses every drop that escapes. You see, she has traveled to Guatemala, and has witnessed the hardships so many people endure simply carrying water to their homes. She has learned to appreciate running water, and to conserve it. Keith and I were startled two years ago when we took our son Evans and his wife Emily to Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, another place where water is liquid gold. Shortly after we checked in, they knocked on the door of our room, asking if we had an extra trash can with which they could catch the water in their shower, and then reuse it by pouring it in the toilet tank. We were puzzled by their strategy, but later learned it is a common practice for reducing water usage.

It does not take much for us to face the fact that we Americans are conspicuous consumers - in food, water, raw materials and resources, and yes, energy too. While we constitute 5% of the world's population, we consume 24% of the world's energy. In other words, each of us devours more than an omer of oil a day.

The problem is not merely that we need to cutback, share, and provide more for the rest of the world. The problem is that we have contributed to a global energy crisis, indulging in a lifestyle that is not sustainable for planet earth. If India and China follow our dubious example, we will need several more planets.^{iv} You may now think I am sounding melodramatic. Yet the prophetic voices regarding the future of planet earth include our own denominational leadership.

Fifteen years ago, the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA, approved a report entitled *Hope for a Global Future*. This document describes how we as Christians need to practice stewardship for all creation so that there may be just and sustainable human development throughout our world. Regarding consumption, the report asks us to reconceive what constitutes the ‘good life.’ Our Christian and Reformed heritage can help us envision a less materialistic and more frugal lifestyle as faithful disciples.^v What might this look like? For one thing, instead of heading to the malls to shop the Memorial Day sales in two weeks, we might plan a more fitting celebration by inviting our neighbors over to share a potluck picnic in the backyard. Frugality wins whenever we repair instead of replace, reuse and recycle rather than throw out. Perhaps the best news in the paper recently was that the DE landfill is losing money because recycling has become so successful! (Amen to that!)

Regarding environmental sustainability and food sufficiency, the General Assembly report urges us to give priority to sustainable farming, local growers, fairer distribution of land, the viability of small farms, and community-based programs for sustainable agriculture.^{vi} Westminster’s local food emphasis this spring sought not simply to tout fresher, healthier, tastier food, but to advocate sustainability and practical ways to decrease our carbon footprint. Did you know that more oil goes into food production, packaging and delivery than into any other part of our economy?^{vii} The community garden on our front lawn serves as more than a vehicle for connecting with the neighborhood and providing space for urban gardening, it stands as a testimony to the importance of local, organic food, in decreasing our dependence on oil.

Many people today recognize that it is critical that we change our lifestyle - particularly our habits of consumption - if future generations are to have a viable future on this planet. Sadly, my generation, and most generations since WWII, have consumed mindlessly and selfishly. But we have a chance to change, and amend our ways, so that we leave the planet in better shape for our descendants. Christians, and other people of faith, have come to realize that we are called to a radically different lifestyle – one involving the stewardship of all creation. God has given humankind this world as an amazing gift, a gift to be cherished and protected so that its resources may be used wisely and prudently to sustain the lives of all people.

An omer a day... maybe it will help keep disaster away, as we learn to live simply so that others may simply live. Perhaps higher gas prices will force us to reevaluate our driving habits, and inspire us to commute by bike or bus. While some families try to scale back to one car, maybe church members will create carpools. What will we do with the money we save? Invest it in our children’s future and education? Tithe to the church? Extend micro-loans to people in developing countries through kiva.org? What will we do with the extra time? Spend it with our families? Use it to help others as a mentor, a community gardener, a driver for FISH?

Last month Westminster’s session, or governing board, voted to become an Earth Care Congregation. This designation is awarded to (PCUSA) congregations who have already taken steps to protect the planet, and who commit themselves to making earth care an ongoing priority as followers of Christ. We had to score a certain number of points in the areas of worship, education, our facilities, and outreach. Being an Earth Care congregation will keep our feet to the fire as we strive to minimize our carbon footprint, and to maximize our effort to renew the planet for the family of God.

Sometimes we forget that the Lord 's Prayer is plural – the prayer Jesus taught us does not promote a God and me faith, but a faith lived in community, one which it tied to neighbor. When we pray, *Give us this day our daily bread*, we are praying not simply for enough food on our tables, but enough food for all God's people, enough for the world. May we live lives which seek to ensure that there is daily manna for every child of God.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Bread of Angels" sermon, *Bread of Angels* (Chalice Press: Boston, 1998.) p. 9.

ⁱⁱ wikipedia

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.mindfully.org/Sustainability/Americans-Consume-24percent.htm>

^{iv} Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007) pp. 183-184.

^v *Hope for a Global Future*. PC(USA) (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1996) p.5.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 6.

^{vii} <http://www.animalvegetablemiracle.com/Steven%20Excerpt.html>