September 2023

Belton Joyner, Jr - Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

September 3rd - Text: Exodus 16:2-19, 31-32 "Provisions of Enough in the Wilderness"

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Exodus 16:15. God has provided food for a hungry people and they look at it and mutter, "What is it?" How often has God tried to give me a gift and I looked at it and wondered, "What's going on? What is it?" When God answers my prayer in a way different from what I expect, I might not recognize the gift God wants to give.

The Hebrew children called this bread "manna" (Exodus 16:31). The funny thing is that "manna" is the Hebrew mān hū for "What is it?"

Exodus 16:16 offers some wisdom for us to use in the distribution of food in the twenty-first century. God's will ("The Lord has commanded...") is that everyone has enough and no one has more at the expense of those with less. The church I attend has a "Little Free Pantry." It is a large container that is always unlocked. It has in it all sorts of daily foods. Located in the church parking lot on a busy city street, it is emptied almost every day. I was inspired by what I heard one of the "clients" say the other day. He said, "I could probably use another can of beans and some of that soup, but I think I ought to leave it for someone who hasn't got here yet."

Take a moment to read 2 Corinthians 8:8-15. Those verses are the

September 10th - Text: 1 Kings 19:1-8 "Nourishment in Famine, Strength for the Journey"

You would think that it would be a great moment for Elijah. He had just had a showdown competition with the prophets of Baal and Elijah had won (1 Kings 18:38-40). (Charles Wesley wrote a hymn about the follow-up celebration—1 Kings 18:41-46—541 in The United Methodist Hymnal). But things turned sour for Elijah. When Queen Jezebel found out that Elijah had humiliated her favorites and indeed that Elijah had done them in (1 Kings 18:40), she sent a messenger to tell Elijah that she was going to get revenge and have him killed.

Even though Elijah had been blessed as a servant of God's victory, now he was frightened so much that he fled out into the wilderness (1 Kings 19:3). Doesn't that sound a bit like us? God has been our strength and shield through all of life, but if life throws us a curve ball, we run for the dugout, not bothering to take a turn at bat. What happened to our confidence in God?

Things were so overwhelming for Elijah that he wished he were dead (v. 4). But food and drink showed up (v. 6) and thus it was for the forty days and forty nights it took Elijah to get to Horeb (v. 8)....There the word of the Lord came to him (1 Kings 19:9).

I got to thinking about it. When life's journey gets challenging, do I assume that God will desert me? How do I approach the hard moments? What is my "solitary broom tree" (1 Kings 19:4)?

insights of the apostle Paul on this matter of the fair balance between abundance and need. It is interesting to note that Paul offers his observations not as a commandment (v. 8), but as a way of testing the genuineness of our love for others.

Maybe I do not have extra food resources to share. Maybe I do not have spare financial accounts. Maybe I do not have clothes that pile up unused. But, what about my time? Can I share some of it with a lonely person? But, what about my prayer energy? Can I expand the range of those for whom I pray? But, what about my joy in church fellowship? Can I invite an "outsider" to be part of the gathered community?

In this Exodus text, there is a steady prompt to handle things differently on the Sabbath (vv. 22-30). I see this as a reminder that the final focus in all of this is to be on God, the God of us all.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Daily Devotions for Die-Hard Fans (Extra Point Publishers), Ed McMinn has written: "Whether it's fast food or home-cooked, everything we eat is a gift from God secured through a divine plan in which some plants and animals have given up their lives....That's worth a thank you!"

Praver:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "You provide, O Lord..."

Elijah discovered that the gifts of God sometimes come one day at a time. Elijah discovered that God does not let go of us even when we let go of God. Elijah discovered what the hymn writer Thomas Chisholm expressed as "strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow" (140, The United Methodist Hymnal).

Elijah was one of the "great ones." He was a strong and effective prophet. Nevertheless, he also had the time of despair and uncertainty. God found a way to break through that emptiness and to restore Elijah's meaning and purposefulness. Let us be encouraged that moments of despair do not mean that God is through with us. God is going to go with us to tomorrow and then to tomorrow's tomorrow.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Robert P. Jones (White Too Long, Simon and Schuster) quotes a plaque at National Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama: "We will remember with hope because hopelessness is the enemy of justice, with courage because peace requires bravery, with persistence because justice is a constant struggle, with faith because we shall overcome."

Prayer

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "God of Yesterday, move with me this day, and point me toward Your tomorrow..."

Please take a moment to share your thoughts about Rev. Dr. Joyner's Bible Study.

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September 17th - Text: Mark 6:30-44 "You Give Them Something to Eat"

This familiar story—feeding the five thousand—is one of the very few miracle accounts that appear in all four gospel collections, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We recognize it as a sign of Jesus' great compassion (v. 34) and His desire to help this crowd with His teaching (v. 34). We certainly recognize that God is able to do a lot with what we consider "just a little."

But, I want to zero in on an often forgotten dimension to this incident. The report of the miraculous meal is held in place, surrounded by two similar references. Mark 6:31 says that Jesus wanted the disciples to get off by themselves to take a break. Mark 6:45-46 tells us that when the feeding was over, Jesus still wanted the disciples (and Himself) to get some "away time" for prayer. In between these two appeals for quiet time comes the power of the miracle.

Yet, it is important to note that even our Lord and His closest followers needed time to downshift, relax, and get away. Jesus even went off by himself to pray (Mark 6:46).

I have to ask myself: Am I staying too busy? All the ways I spend my time are good. Relationships with others are important. And preaching and writing and teaching are good uses of my time. But, in light of how Jesus and the disciples used their time, do I have the rhythm of being busy and being quiet? I suspect most of us are busy being busy and do not have the experiences desired in Mark 6:31 ("...Rest a while") and Mark 6:46 ("He went up on the mountain to pray").

When was the last time you did nothing? When was the last time you read the Scriptures when they were not assigned for a duty? When was the last time you stopped everything you were doing and had quiet, personal prayer? When was the last time you said "Not now" to an invitation to undertake some helpful task? When was the last time you enjoyed a ball game or a movie or a concert just because you wanted to? When was the last time you thumbed through the hymnal so you could sing some old favorites?

Feeding the five thousand is certainly telling us a lot about our Lord and His values. But, to tell the whole story, we need to acknowledge the context of that miracle: quiet, apart time.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Extraordinariness of the Christian Life* (National Student Christian Federation), Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life. Such customs have only one purpose—to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Come apart with me, Lord..."

September 24th - Text: Luke 14:7-15 "Feasting and Table Fellowship as the Way of Discipleship"

When I read this week's focal text, my mind and heart started to work overtime.

James is three years old. During worship, he stays in the church nursery, except on the Sundays we have Communion. When it is time to go to the Table, James' dad goes down to the nursery and brings his son up to join in the Bread and Cup.

Once a month, there is a huge sign in front of our fellowship center: "Free Breakfast." Our homeless and street-walking neighbors come in and share in food and conversation...

The Chandler Sunday School class goes downtown and prepares and serves meals at the urban ministry center....There is an annual pancake breakfast because that is the way the men of the church remember one of their colleagues, now deceased....Kim bakes cookies by the ton and then she brings them to church where folks buy them with all of the proceeds going to missions...At the monthly business meeting, someone in my Sunday School class will bring favorite refreshments.

How about the ice cream social and hymn sing? What about the monthly fellowship supper with mission-driven speakers? Can we include the "Little Free Pantry" that keeps food available in our church parking lot? Don't forget the candies and cookies and sandwiches as the Halloween

gift to the community in the parking lot. Snacks at the weekly Bible study. Wednesday morning clergy breakfast when local pastors get together. Meals when you get home from the hospital. Water booth at the annual PRIDE parade. Collecting groceries to be given to the homeless shelter.

Jesus knew that lives were transformed by the fellowship of food. He even said to "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19) as an ongoing invitation to His Table. Our Lord ate with people whom others would ignore. Our risen Lord asked, "Have you anything here to eat?" (Luke 24:42, and they shared some fish. Isn't it interesting that when Jesus gave Peter the mission for the future, He said, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17). It was at a meal that those on the road to Emmaus recognized our Lord (Luke 24:30-31). I'm glad that I can join three-year old James at the Table

What Someone Else Has Said:

S T Kimbrough, Jr. and Dean McIntyre (*A Theology of the Sacraments Interpreted by John and Charles Wesley, Resource*) wrote: "At the Lord's Table, we take a two-course meal... which consists of pardoning grace... and the life of holiness animated by the Holy Spirit. 'O that the world with us would taste' of this feast, says Wesley."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: "Make this meal holy..."

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