

*Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M Fluent, Pastor*

September 20, 2020

Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recordings of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor and the music for our hymn played by Della Leytze, on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost. It is 2 days before the Fall Equinox, the beginning of Autumn. Welcome to our worship. Among congregations of the United Church of Christ, today is celebrated as Just Peace Sunday, a day when we are reminded that there is no real peace without justice and that Jesus called peacemakers blessed, "for they shall be called children of God."

As we begin our worship on this Sunday, let us join together in our opening hymn. (Those who receive our emails have a recording of the music played by Della Leytze in our sanctuary.)

***Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature, O Thou of God and man the son,
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor, thou my soul's glory, joy and crown.***

***Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands, robed in the blooming garb of spring;
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer, who makes the woeful heart to sing.***

***Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moonlight, and all the twinkling, starry host:
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer, than all the angels heaven can boast.***

***Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations! Son of God and Son of man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration, now and forever more be thine.***

Our reading from the Psalms for this morning is Psalm 105, verses 1-6:

***O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.
Glory in God's holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually.
Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he
uttered, O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.***

This morning we turn to a story from the Old Testament as our primary Bible lesson for the day. It is an important story, beyond what people usually think, because it establishes the foundation for a way of life that is based in simplicity and stewardship, that became a model for future generations and for the early Christian community. This is the story of manna in the wilderness, as it is recorded in chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus, verses 9-21:

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.

And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon you can find it on our church website or open the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

Whenever the story of the manna in the wilderness is read in a Bible study or in worship, someone always wants to know, "What was the manna, really?" Maybe you've heard one of the plausible "scientific" explanations. The most common one, I think, is that it is a sweet secretion left by an insect of some kind. But Scripture is often written to be amusing, so I'll let you in on the inside joke of this story from the Exodus. The Hebrew word for "manna" means something like "What is it?" The people on the exodus didn't know, and neither do we. The manna was a peculiar gift from God, bestowed upon a grumbling crowd of people who weren't sure they wanted it.

This is a miracle story. The character of a miracle story is, first of all, that it is not a story full of facts to be explained. Sometimes there is something like an explanation that one can give, based on something we can see in the natural world, except that usually the story was told to explain the natural phenomenon instead of the other way around. A little child asks you, "Why is there a big pillar of salt in the Dead Sea?" Tell the story of Job's wife, who looked back at the inferno engulfing her former home in Sodom, and turned into a pillar of salt. "Have you noticed how the tides in the Red Sea seem to part the waters at certain times?" someone asks. Let me tell you a story of how God parted them in the mighty act of freeing the people of God. "Look at that peculiar white seed-like stuff on the ground. How did it get there?" It reminds us of God's wonderful gift of manna that kept the Hebrew people alive in the wilderness.

This is the way people of faith have told our stories for millennia. The stories are fanciful and full of humor; and they also bring home important truths that help us know how to live faithfully in changing times.

Modern readers miss the important things that the Scriptures have to teach us when they fail to perceive the symbolic intention of the stories they find there. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan put it well, when he said, “My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.”

So what is manna? Literally, the answer may make little difference. But symbolically, it is the gift of God that sustains God’s people in the wilderness of their lives. Once we know that, we can stop talking about bug juice, because we are ready to consider the question of meaning:

According to the story, God gives the people manna, and then God gives the people rules for us to abide by when we eat it. We are told to gather only enough for the day. We are told that, if we save some for tomorrow, it will spoil. Only on the sixth day are we to gather a second daily helping, so that the Sabbath may be observed. And we are given consequences for the actions that we take: for those who gathered much had just enough, and those who gathered little had no lack, but those who hoarded the manna found it spoiled and useless the next morning, because that was God’s design. The manna clearly belonged to no one. It wasn’t to become commodified. It was a pure gift from God.

So instead of asking what the manna was, we could engage in a little exercise of imagining what the manna might be – in our world, for us. We can let our imaginations run, because the manna could be anything that comes to the world by God’s grace. It comes as forests and streams, oil and gas, electrical energy, air, and food of many kinds. It may be shelter for the night, or clothing, or anything else that all of us know we need – the things that come to

all of us and do not belong to any of us, and ought to be sacred among us. It is the bread of heaven, the gifts of the grace of God.

This abundance of God's creation that can take so many forms is the great, divine gift of blessing, but it does not come to us without rules for its use. We are invited to take what we need for today, but never to accumulate it for tomorrow, because there are others with us on the journey through life's wilderness, and they also need their share, and the manna of the earth needs the day to renew itself. Some of us pick up more than we need of it, and some get less; but if we are careful with one another, we will find that there is enough for us all to share, and it will be there again tomorrow. Through history, humans have been tempted to turn the manna of God into a commodity that can be bought and sold and owned by some of us, but when we do so we confront the promise of God that it will spoil, and the blessing given for the life of all the world will cause death and disease and the corruption of the earth.

So the story of manna permeates our lives and gives guidance to our decisions about the ethics of our life together. It speaks about how people relate to the natural environment we've been given, and it suggests how God invites us to care for it and care for one another in its use. It warns us about what will happen if too few people accumulate too much, and too many others do not get their share. To some, it may seem like a fantasy unsuited to a realistic modern society. But around us the evidence appears to be growing, in natural disasters, in political failure, and in social discontent, that years of environmental misuse and centuries of indifference to social inequities could spoil the gift of manna that sustains us all.

The problems of our modern world sometimes seem to be unfathomable; but often solutions are simpler than they seem. We remember that the slaves from Egypt found their way through the wilderness, despite their incessant grumbling, and with God's help made their way to the promised land. But first, they had to see some rotten, wormy manna, when they didn't listen to Moses telling them that it wasn't for them to accumulate and hoard. Wouldn't it be odd to think, after all our social and political and financial wrangling, that

the way through the wilderness of this most troubled time is a spiritual one, after all.

Dedication of Pledge Cards

We thank all our members and friends who have returned their Stewardship Commitment cards for support of the ministries of St. Paul Church in the coming year.

Holy God, receive these commitments that we make to the ministries of your church in the coming year. May they serve to advance your kingdom's work in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

Our Time of Prayer

In our prayers this week are the people in California and Oregon who are losing homes and farmlands in the raging wildfires. We pray for those whose lives have been disrupted by the hurricane winds and flooding in our southern states. We pray for those families that are suffering from violence, and for all those who work every day to bring that violence to an end. We pray for everyone who is affected by the CoVid 19 epidemic – those who are sick, those who treat the sick, those confined to hospitals unable to be with relatives and friends, and those who are battling depression at home. And we pray for our nation in this election season, so filled with angry voices and mixed, confusing messages. We pray for the earth, for the trees, for the water and air, that we may turn from those practices that harm our planet. God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom
come, Thy will be
done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and
forgive us our
debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from**

**evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**