

EAT!

September 20, 2020

I must confess—I've always loved this story about the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and complaining. It's so human, isn't it? Here's the passage again, in case you missed it: "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "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."

Now, I have from time to time in my vocation angered a congregant or two, or a student or two. But I can honestly say that I've never had the "whole congregation" against me. Yet. And thank you, by the way.

And I love this story, too, because of how Moses and Aaron respond. "Who are we that you complain against us? Your complaint is with the Lord!" Now that's kicking things up a notch, isn't it?

And I love this story because God comes through: manna in the morning, quails in the evening, and then God says: EAT!!!!

Do you remember those road signs from diners by the side of the highway, that would simply read in neon lights with three exclamation marks: "EAT!!!" That's the good news that I have for us today. In the midst of our own wandering in the wilderness, and our own complaining, God says, like that roadside sign lit up in neon red: "EAT!!!" So I'll be drawing out for our consideration two themes today: moving us from complaint to consolation; or, put another way: moving us from the acidic and destructive corrosion of resentment to the life-giving and savory comfort food of God's grace and love calling us towards justice.

So, complaints. I have a few.

Have you liked our weather, lately? Gotta say, it was a pretty beautiful summer—but have you felt that chill of November in the north wind? And after November comes the hard season—December, January, February, March (?)... Lisa asks me, regularly during those months, as we bundle up in boots and gloves and facemask and snow suit just to take the dog for a walk in the morning: "and why, Jon, do we live in Wisconsin, again?" So—we can complain about the weather. My grill all but goes into storage, and my garden lies frozen and fallow. Can't we just eat? Take me back to the fleshpots of Philadelphia! I'm going to die here in this frigid place.

Or, how's your job going? We heard Matt and Rissel play Nina Simone's "Work Song" just a while ago—and you couldn't miss the lyrics: "Been workin'/and workin'/but I still

got so terribly far to go. I committed crime Lord I needed/crime of being hungry and poor.” That was 1961. Why can’t we all just eat?

Or, are you a sports fan? I have to confess that when our children were younger and participating in youth and high school sports I was “one of those dads.” I played sports myself, and refereed basketball back when my knees would allow, and so I felt uniquely qualified, having 20/16 vision up until recently, to complain about a call or two (or ten) a game. Loudly. Obnoxiously. Now—it’s true that I never was ejected from a game—unlike a former Green Bay Packers coach you might remember. But I certainly complained. Perhaps you can empathize. And lately, my word, the complaints I am hearing online aren’t just about the referees—but about the players...boycotts, trashing Packers gear, turning in season tickets. Can’t we all just, well, eat? Take us back to the fleshpots of that last Super Bowl season.

Or, are you a fan of American politics? Lisa is a politics junkie, and she puts on “Morning Joe” or some other pundits almost every morning while we make coffee. And there is, well, a little that we might complain about in our political culture these days. I support the separation of church and state, and while in my office as pastor I will protect our non-partisan status and tax-exemption because I think that’s an important principle: but good God, as a person, I have actually said take us back to the good old days of George W. Bush, or of Bill Clinton. Of course, both had more than their share of flaws—lying about an ill-conceived and unjust war, and lying about a stupid sexual affair, but right now it seems that there’s a veritable smorgasbord of complaints about immorality across several aisles to be laid at the feet of our leaders: arrogance, lying, stealing, intransigence, greed, violence, corruption, incompetence, duplicity. I could go on. Can’t we just eat?

And then there’s COVID-19. We are at the mercy of this tiny little virus, and for many, if not most of us, we complain about (if we don’t deny) how something so small, so invisible, so deadly, has disrupted nearly everything about everyday life. We are wandering in the wilderness, aren’t we? What’s the latest from the CDC? Can we trust the CDC? How about the WHO? Oh, we’ve chosen to defund the WHO. What about our Governor, Tony Evers—and his Badger Bounce Back. Oh, that’s unconstitutional. Mask mandate? Say, what? We are wandering in the wilderness, and Moses and Aaron (not Rodgers) say: “Who are we that you complain about us? Your complaint is with God.”

And so here comes the simple good news: God hears our complaining. And God acts to give us manna. So, eat!

Now, by encouraging you to “eat!!!” I’m not saying go grab a big bag of Doritos and chow down. When God says, “eat!” God wants us to participate in life fully; to develop and to grow; to flourish. Think Yukon gold potatoes from the garden roasted with fresh

herbs and sliced beefsteak tomatoes with basil and mozzarella drizzled with balsamic vinaigrette.

We flourish, we flow, we find fulfillment when we SEE God's handiwork around us; when we RECOGNIZE God's gifts to us; when we HEAR God's promise in everyday life. Because there's always manna from heaven. We need eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to love.

How that happens for each of us is likely to be different. God doesn't have only one menu.

For instance, this semester I'm teaching a class on the History of Christianity to 1500 with students in seminary. This week we are studying (among other texts) the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas is one of the many gospels from the first few centuries of Christianity that didn't make it into the Bible. If you haven't ever read The Gospel of Thomas, it's well worth looking it up (a simple Google search will get you there).

Many scholars think the Gospel of Thomas is as ancient as Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of Thomas is primarily a series of sayings attributed to Jesus, recorded by the Apostle Thomas. Many of the sayings are very similar, if not identical, to those in the canonical gospels. See if you hear these sayings as good news—as consolation to some complaint; as manna in the wilderness.

SAYING 14: Jesus said: "When you go into any region and walk about in the countryside, when people take you in, eat what they serve you, and heal the sick among them. After all, what goes into your mouth will not defile you; rather, it is what comes out of your mouth that will defile you."

So, EAT!, suggests Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas. As in the canonical gospels, Jesus is teaching his Jewish listeners that when they are guests they can drop the kosher laws that otherwise mandate very careful dietary restrictions. The spirit of any law gives life; the letter kills. For Jesus, in the Gospel of Thomas, God isn't only or even primarily about purity—God is about grace and healing: God says, "eat!"

Or, SAYING 22—somewhat more indirect, but listen to hear the good news here; a way to move from resentment to compassion:

Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his disciples, "These nursing babies are like those who enter the kingdom." The disciples said to Jesus, "Then shall we enter the kingdom as babies?" Jesus said to the disciples: "When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female ... then you will enter the kingdom."

Now— isn't THAT good news? In a highly patriarchal culture, with strict boundaries between what's male and female, with strict behaviors expected of each, Jesus suggests that God's way is beyond conventional dichotomies, beyond binaries. God says: EAT!"

Or, one more—SAYING 77: "Jesus said, "I am the light that is over all things. I am all; from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

Now—maybe that doesn't sound like good news to you, at first. Maybe you've lifted up a rock or two in your life, and all you found there were arthropods and worms: creepy things.

But isn't that EXACTLY how God works through Jesus? Jesus died on the cross. God goes with us into the tough and ugly things of life. Even under the rocks of our life, those things we don't want turned over, God is there. Even in the wilderness, where we wander, God is there. Even when we're working on the chain gang, convicted of the crime of being hungry and poor: God is there. So, eat!

Our wandering in the wilderness of COVID-19 has a point, and a purpose, in other words. The Israelites came to the promised land after 40 years of wandering. Imagine being in year 20—they had no idea how much longer it might be. Wouldn't you complain? And God gave them manna in the interim, and said: Eat!

And that's our reality, too. We may not get to see the Promised Land of racial equity, but in the meantime, we can see the manna of every small step of progress and righteous protest bringing us a little closer to that beloved community. So, eat!!

We may not get to see the Promised Land of gender equality, but in the meantime we have the manna of marriage equality, and the promise of #metoo to end the kinds of casual, and not so casual, abuse that have been tolerated for far too long. So, eat!

We may not get to see the Promised Land of economic equality, but in the meantime we have the manna of significant gains in income among the least among us all over the world; the poorest of the poor are today LESS poor than they were 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 50 years ago—by far. So, eat!

We may not get to see the Promised Land of sustainable living, when wildfires don't burn uncontrolled and fill our skies with haze, but we can see the manna of solar power, and wind, and water, and we can organize and mobilize and live out the green gospel, day by day: "Split a piece of wood, and I am there." So—eat!

In each of our lives, we have these gifts of manna that can sustain us in the meantime; we have those hints of an infinitely generous God, like a landowner who pays workers far MORE than they deserve, and pays all workers a living wage. So, eat!

On Tuesday, which as you may recall had temperatures near 80, both Lisa and I after a long day of ZOOM meetings and conference calls decided to head out onto Pigeon Lake in our little 1996 pontoon boat.

We knew swimming was unlikely, but we both felt like we needed a change of scenery—a tonic of wildness, as Thoreau put it.

And our little lake didn't disappoint, once we anchored and shut off the motor. Blue jays, eagles, hawks, cranes, herons, swallows, crows, and more came to keep us company. They soared, and screeched, and danced in the air around us. It was a feast for the senses—such a simple thing, and yet breathtaking in its beauty.

God has given us manna, in this wilderness. We can move from the acids of resentment and complaint to the solace of the comfort food of grace.

SAYING 96, from the Gospel of Thomas: “The Father’s kingdom is like a woman. She took a little leaven, rolled it into dough, and made it into large loaves of bread. Anyone here with two ears to hear, better listen!” Or, even better, EAT!” Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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