

## Enough for All

Exodus 16

First Mennonite Church

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Saturday mornings, when I walk through the Farmers Market with my canvas shopping bags, I can get carried away. The fresh fruits and vegetables attract me with their vibrant colors and the promise of delicious eating. In the back of my mind is also the nagging thought that peach and sweet corn season won't last much longer. This combination of pull and push—positive and negative dynamics—renders me vulnerable to over-purchasing for my single-person household. During the week I sometimes have to scramble to ensure that food doesn't spoil.

The Amish baked goods aside . . . most of the things I fall for at the open-air market have low caloric impact and high nutritional value. Thank goodness! The seductions of the supermarket are something else again. A person has to work hard to discern nutritional value, checking the bold advertising claims against the fine print on labels. And clever displays and sales tactics lure us to buy more than we need—instead of *one* package, *ten for \$10*. If you're like me, you often leave the store with some unanticipated item or quantity. I'm a sucker for bargains.

It's a great luxury to acquire more food than is immediately needed for my sustenance. Thanks to the refrigerator-freezer we take for granted in our North American homes, I can stockpile perishable foods. My roomy cupboards easily hold multiple kinds of cereal and soup and pasta.

But the basic parameters for how much any of us brings home from the supermarket or farmers market are set by how much cash or the equivalent—Link card or credit card—we have available to us. As a result, some people have full bellies every day. Some people eat well at the beginning of the month and then run out of food. Others are chronically hungry. The disparity is glaring. The disparity is disturbing. The disparity is unbiblical.

In the extremity of the desert wilderness, God showed the Hebrew people a different standard for food distribution and consumption.

This bowl [hold up] belonged to my grandmother. It's roughly the capacity of an *omer*, the measurement referenced in Exodus chapter 16. This much, about 2 quarts dry measure, was the daily portion of manna designated for each member of a household. I'm placing the bowl where you can see it as we engage this remarkable text.

What miracles do we encounter in the story of manna in the desert? Typically, we focus on the miracle of the desert producing food when it appeared that no food was to be found.

This was such highly unusual food that it was not recognized by the people, as verse 15 says: “When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was.” Thus the name “manna” from the Hebrew *mān hû* (what is it?). Moses tells them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.”

At this point, the Israelites have been in the wilderness for six weeks, since their dramatic crossing of the Red Sea and escape from Pharaoh’s army. They have exhausted the food supplies they hurriedly brought with them from Egypt. As their hunger mounts, they grow understandably anxious. They even start second-guessing the escape from bondage. Why, in Egypt, they say, we ate our fill of bread!

Their fearful nostalgia is exaggerated; yet bread was indeed a significant currency in ancient Egypt. Workers were paid in bread. Egyptian soldiers received a ration of four pounds of bread a day. And bread was placed in tombs of the wealthy to be available in the afterlife.<sup>1</sup>

The bread of Egypt was the bread of a hierarchical and unjust society, a society of owners and slaves, of rich and poor, of rulers treated like gods. The bread of Egypt was the bread of empire and exploitation. The people of Israel have been liberated from Egypt. The bread of Egypt is now gone. In its place, God offers the gift of a new kind of bread.

God’s provision of desert bread functions quite differently from the flow of food through a stratified social system driven by wealth and power. Manna comes with the dew each morning. It’s freely available to all. There is sufficient supply for everyone for each day. Since it spoils, it can’t be hoarded and so there is no ongoing temptation of greed.

***The true miracle of manna is that this bread nurtures a community of equality and a culture of enough.*** The LORD instructs (verse 16): “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.”

In the beginning, however, some gathered more and some less. Yet when the manna was measured, “those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed” (verse 18). In other words, manna can’t be manipulated. It is inherently just. Thereafter (verse 21), “morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed.”

Now look again at the bowl I brought here this morning. Imagine each of us holding such a bowl filled with highly-nutritious food, secure in the knowledge that we had enough food for today and that tomorrow would bring an equal sufficiency. Imagine each of us knowing that no person in our community would be hungry today because each of them, too, had a full bowl.

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Sinclair, *The Spirituality of Bread* (Kelowna, BC: Northstone, 2007), 51.

The qualities of manna reinforce the faith lesson God intends. Daily manna teaches trust in the one true God. Daily manna says, don't worry about tomorrow. Daily manna treats everyone the same and eliminates competition for life-giving nourishment. Daily manna chases away greed and jealousy. Daily manna reinforces solidarity.

Another quality of manna is described in part of the chapter we did not hear read aloud, namely, that manna honors the Sabbath. A double portion is available on the sixth day and none on the seventh day, thus enabling the people to rest on the Sabbath and enjoy the food prepared the day before.

As with other tests the Israelites face while wandering the desert, manna schools the people in the habits and principles that make for a community of justice and piety. So that the lesson will not be forgotten, one omer of manna—one daily portion—is to be kept before the sacred ark of the covenant as a commemorative sign of God's saving work for future generations.

Why this commemorative manna did not spoil is a question without an answer, although we might speculate that for purposes of the Exodus narrative, when the manna is associated with holy time (the Sabbath) and holy space (the Ark of the Covenant), it doesn't decay.

Let me say just a few words about the scholarly evidence for manna. There is a natural substance that forms in the wilderness in the Sinai Peninsula. When the sap of the tamarisk tree is released by an insect, it forms a light-colored ball that falls to the ground. The substance melts in the heat of the day, but the balls can be gathered in the cool of the morning and cooked to make a kind of bread. The food spoils quickly. Its taste is sweet. This information corresponds well with the details offered in Exodus 16, where manna is collected in the morning before it melts and where it is said to be baked and boiled, to resemble white coriander seed, and to taste like wafers made with honey (verse 31).<sup>2</sup>

Manna is only a wilderness food. It ceases to be available once the Israelites reach the Promised Land. In the desert, manna not only gives vital nutrition, it also supplies embodied knowledge of God's graciousness and God's desire for shalom justice. Perhaps we could think of manna as bread justice with training wheels. Walter Brueggemann puts it in a loftier way: "The provision for the bread becomes a model for the right distribution of food and a paradigm for a covenant community that is trustfully organized around God's unfailing generosity."<sup>3</sup>

The Hebrew people later codified into law provisions for caring for those on the margins, mandating that generosity be shown to others as they had received via the Exodus. Deuteronomy 24:19–22 provides an apt example with respect to food:

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Numbers 11:8, "The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil."

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 813.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul reaches back to the manna story to make his case for the young Christian church in Corinth, Greece to support financially the struggling Christians in Jerusalem:

2 Corinthians 8:13-15 (NIV): Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

As you can hear, Paul stresses "equality" as the goal of sharing so that basic needs are met. Isn't this how we at FMC approach our Sister Church relationship? Isn't this how Mennonite Church USA has determined it will cover health insurance for all church workers? The church provides an alternative witness, a distribution schema that rests on trust in God.

Scholar Terence Fretheim writes: "The increasing gap between rich and poor in modern societies is certainly in part due to the hoarding of manna. It witnesses to a failure to recognize that all that we have is due to God's goodness, not our ability to gather manna better than anyone else. The world of God's creation, including the distribution of food resources, is to be so structured that those 'who gather little have no lack.'"<sup>4</sup>

These days, we talk about the enormous need for food security. Food security means that people have "assured access to enough nutritious food to sustain an active and healthy life."<sup>5</sup>

Frances Moore Lappé of the Small Planet Institute, writing in the July 2008 issue of *Sojourners*, notes: "Through the lens of remaking power relationships, we also see food as a right of citizenship, one now inscribed—either for all citizens or for children—in 22 national constitutions. We know how to make this right real."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*. Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 186.

<sup>5</sup> "Key Hunger Terms," Bread for the World website, [www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org).

<sup>6</sup> Frances Moore Lappé, "The Shortage Isn't Food, It's Democracy," *Sojourners*, July 2008, 18.

The provision of daily manna gave the Israelites food security. Along with enough nutrition for all, it fostered right relationships among people. And yet, as we know from the biblical record, the blessing of manna did not squash the complaints and rebellion of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. It did not transfer to daily life in Palestine and so prophets like Amos and Isaiah had to chastise the people for the intolerable gap between the haves and have-nots. Paul had to beg repeatedly on behalf of the church offering from the Gentile believers to the needy Jewish Christians. Jesus, of course, focused much of his teaching on these matters, as we will continue to explore in this series.

*The miracle of manna is the practice of a community of equality and a culture of enough for all.*

*Thanks be to God for manna!*

One way we at First Mennonite Church show responsibility to the commonweal, is by volunteering to share our talents and time. In response to today's message, I invite you to take a few minutes to complete the Work of the Church forms. Check all applicable areas; don't be shy and don't assume that whoever has been doing a particular role will be continuing. Then place your completed sheet in the offering plate.