

What Faith Asks of Us *The Grace to Receive*

Exodus 16:2-3, 11-15

October 1, 2023

Several years ago now, *Psychology Today* published a piece titled “5 Reasons Why Receiving is Harder Than Giving.”¹ The author begins by noting that most of us were taught that it is more noble (or in the language of scripture, more blessed) to give than it is to receive. Of course, this proverb is necessary, a warning against selfishness and greed. But the essay suggests that receiving is more difficult for many of us because it involves releasing control. In receiving, we open ourselves to the risk that comes with vulnerability. We acknowledge that we cannot manage all by ourselves, that we rely on the generosity of others. We receive.

It’s an ancient story God’s people have never forgotten, told from one generation to the next: how by divine providence, the Israelites are liberated from captivity in Egypt and make their way into the wilderness, guided every step by the Spirit of God in the form of fire and cloudy pillar.

They are on their way to the Promised Land. They are free at last from the tyranny of Pharaoh. They have experienced firsthand the awesome power of the only God. But that was then. God’s people have grown weary.

They are hungry. Or as we say in our home, they are hangry—that difficult combination of hunger and anger. They begin to complain (the word appears seven times in the chapter). They complain against God and God’s appointed leadership. They are angry. They are exhausted. And they are afraid. And so, forgetting the One whose grace has brought them this far, they grumble against God. They suggest that they have been led into the wilderness only to die of hunger.

We know this story because it is our story. How swiftly awe and wonder are supplanted by anxiety and self-concern. The unending onslaught of daily stress strains the faith we have. We forget the road we’ve traveled. Did we really cross the parted waters of the Red Sea without getting our feet wet? Or was it all an illusion? Where is God now? I can relate to the difficulty our ancestors had trusting even with all they have seen and known.

You heard the rest of the story, how early one morning the Israelites stumble out of their tents to discover this flaky substance that covers the ground like frost. And they ask, “What is it?” In Hebrew, the question sounds like this: *man hu*. And manna becomes its name. What is it? It is enough for today. What is it? It is a symbol of this truth: *God will provide*.

When we face anxiety over what will be or a longing for what once was, we can remember this story. When we are obsessed with instant gratification or incessant acquisition, we would do well to remember this story, the grace of God’s provision preserved in stories like this one and in our own lives as well.

There is no doubt that Jesus had this story in mind when he taught his disciples to pray, “Give us this day our *daily* bread.” Give us, O God, what we need for *today*. Yes, tomorrow will bring new fears and anxieties, new possibilities and opportunities. But God, help us focus on this day, this moment, this ordinary meal. Help us to see it, to notice it, to pause long enough to receive it with heartfelt gratitude. Open our eyes so that we do not take *this* day—or the grace that brought us here—for granted.

In just a moment you will be invited to God's table of abundant grace. You will hear again that only Jesus is the host of this table, that we are guests. That we are receivers, not givers. I had a vivid reminder of that truth three years ago when we celebrated our first "virtual" communion in the early pandemic days. We had planned to celebrate the sacrament by livestream video, and I was to do it in my home. But it was a gorgeous evening, and I simply had to be outside. And so, I chose a spot in the yard where the Wi-Fi was strongest. I brought my laptop and a table out so that the livestream could be played from my laptop. I prepared the elements. Communion was to commence at 7:30 PM. At 7:27 PM, our wonderful neighbor opened his garage door and pushed the lawnmower out. Sara swiftly and graciously ran over and asked if he could wait about fifteen minutes. So, Doug and his twin sons, who were seniors in high school, stood at the edge of the yard, watching. At 7:29 PM, our equally wonderful neighbor on the other side of the house let the dog out to play. The dog stood at the fence staring at us. I proceeded, flanked now by friends and neighbors, a panting dog, and the beauty of creation.

The livestream went off without a hitch. And finally, as I began to break the bread to share it, our son Ben—three years old at the time—began to creep across the yard. He came dangerously close to that table, and he smiled at me. I raised my eyebrows in hopes of scaring him back into the house where he belonged. But he came around the table, and I began to shake my head "no" even as I was offering an invitation to the table. I thought he had relented when, from under the table, I saw a hand reaching for the bread. It was, to say the least, unexpected. It was, to say the most, holy. Daily bread. In fact, later when I asked why he reached for the bread, Ben said (and I'm not making this up), "Because there was enough for me."

The truth of manna in the wilderness and the grace of God is the same. There is enough for all of us to receive it.

That is not the only message in this ancient story. It may be more difficult to receive, but giving is not without its challenge as well. The Israelites, who have lived for far too long under the oppressive regime of Pharaoh, simply cannot trust God's abundance. And so, some of them greedily gather more manna than they need. But when they measure it, the writer of Exodus records a miracle. "Those who gathered too much had nothing left over, and those who did not gather enough had no shortage."

When they try to stockpile the gift of God, it turns sour, and it rots. The message is clear in a time of growing distance between the astonishingly prosperous and the desperately destitute. The abundance that God provides us can only be enjoyed if it is shared. Listen. When we hoard God's grace and all God's other gifts, when we keep them to ourselves, they cease to be good.

Man hu. What is it? It is abundance. What do we do with it? We receive it with gratitude. We share it with generous hearts. This day, with Christians all around the world, you are invited to the table Jesus sets.

There is enough for you here.
So, receive what you need.
And take some to share. Amen.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/intimacy-path-toward-spirituality/201402/5-reasons-why-receiving-is-harder-giving>