

Joshua 5:9–12 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

No More Beans

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: March 6, 2016 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Joshua 5:9-12

The remote village of Sikes was a timber and cotton town. Virgin pine forests and fields of cotton made her something of a boomtown in the early 1900s. In those days Sikes swelled in size; it sported sawmills and cotton gins, banks and stores, a church and two doctors. The Tremont and Gulf railroad ran through town, collecting cotton and timber on its way and dropping off wages and profits in its wake. By 1924 the little outpost in the middle of rural north central Louisiana had several hundred students in school. One of them was my mother.

Mom's family was poor. She used to tell me that they never knew they were poor. I took her at her word. A strong family and a strong faith provided a lot that money couldn't. But they were poor. Grampa Joe was a homesteader and a Baptist minister. In the early twentieth century rural south that meant he had a small farm and a non-paying job. So, while Sikes boomed, they did well enough, you might say. Out of the hard red clay they raised the food they ate and farmed a few acres of cotton. Mom would say they didn't know they were poor, but then she would tell you the stories of what life was like, and it left little doubt. In the boom times, when she wasn't in school, she and her siblings worked the cotton fields literally from dawn to dusk in stagnant, soupy humidity under a sweltering sun. Those were the good times.

By the late 1920s, though, changes were afoot, difficult changes. A fire burned most of the town. The timber ran out. Jobs dried up. And that was before the market crashed. When that happened, the bank closed and the cotton market dried up. If that weren't bad enough, then came the withering drought that John Steinbeck wrote about in *The Grapes of Wrath*. One year it was so bad that almost nothing would grow. I heard Mom tell the story many times about one winter when the only food they had for months were beans. Breakfast, lunch and dinner, 7 days a week, week after week, for weeks on end, nothing but beans. Sick of beans doesn't begin to describe the feeling.

When they complained, Gramps Joe reminded they were lucky to have anything at all. In my mind's eye I see him pulling out his Bible, turning to the Book of Numbers and reading to his children about the Israelites. For forty years the Israelites in the desert had only manna to eat, he read. They complained, "Why can't we have meat. Surely we were better off in Egypt!" I can just see him saying, "When the Israelites were ungrateful that they had any food at all, the Lord burned with anger at them. So you better be grateful you have beans. And pray that you don't have to have nothing but beans to eat for the next forty years."

Well I suppose mom and the Israelites should have been more grateful, but I have a lot of sympathy for their plight. I cannot imagine having just beans to eat for months, and I certainly cannot imagine eating just manna, whatever manna tasted like, for forty years. I'm sure when other crops finally came in and mom's family could eat other things—collards and chicken, bacon and biscuits—they must have been thrilled to death. And if that's so imagine the relief the Israelites felt. Such simple sentences Joshua gives us: "On that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce

of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.”

They had finally crossed the Jordan River and they had entered the Promised Land, [Slide 1] a land flowing with milk and honey, a land lush with produce and possibility. Things were looking up; no more manna, no more beans.

As you well know, though, the prosperity the Israelites found in the Promised Land didn't result in a storybook ending. The first five books of the Bible hold out the idea of the Promised Land as a kind of Utopia, a place where the people will thrive and multiply and all will be well. Beginning with Abraham they followed a promise of a great nation, numerous and prosperous. But when they finally got there, it didn't work out quite that way. In the Promised Land the people were never satisfied. David, Israel's greatest king, needed more than his wife, so he seduced the wife of one of his trusted generals and then murdered him to cover the deed. The prophets of Israel begged over and over again for the wealthy to share what they had with the widow and the orphan, but they would not, because the more wealth they got the more they wanted. Enough was never enough. More than enough was never enough.

From the very beginning God tried to remind them of the dangers of their prosperity. In Deuteronomy 8, God spoke very plainly. I'm quoting here from the Message, a modern paraphrase that is nicely conversational.

Moses says: When you were hungry, then God fed you with manna, something neither you nor your parents knew anything about, so you would learn that men and women don't live by bread only; we live by every word that comes from God's mouth.

Make sure that when [you are in the Promised Land] and you eat and are satisfied, and you build pleasant houses and you settle in, and you see your herds and flocks flourish and more and more money come in, and you watch your standard of living going up and up—make sure you don't become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God.

If you start thinking to yourselves, “I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!”—well, think again. Remember that God, your God, gave you the strength to produce all this wealth so as to confirm the covenant that he promised to your ancestors—as it is today.

If you forget, forget God, your God, I'm on record right now as giving you firm warning: that will be the end of you; I mean it—destruction. You'll go to your doom—the same as the nations God is destroying before you; doom because you wouldn't obey the Voice of God, your God.

God has a couple of things in mind here. The first is how little we actually need to survive. Even though it may have been tiresome, manna for the Israelites and beans for my mother's family were enough. God was worried from the beginning that the people would never realize how little is truly enough and they would never be satisfied no matter how much they had. The other thing God has in mind is that the people were lucky to have what they had. In the Louisiana drought and in the forty years in the desert, they might well have starved to death. And the fact they didn't was not all their own doing. God wanted to remind the people that when they began to think that they accomplished everything themselves, then it was all too easy to say, “This is mine. I earned it.” Then it becomes easy to say, “If you over there don't have anything, well, that's your fault. You didn't work hard enough like I did.” When we think that whatever bounty we have is entirely our doing, we forget how vulnerable we really are. No matter how hard we work, the good days can come to an end. And when we think that whatever bounty we have is entirely our doing, we forget that being grateful means that we are to care for others in their vulnerability.”

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry Matthew tells us that Jesus went out into the wilderness alone for forty days without food. When he came back, he was famished. The devil came to him in his vulnerable state and said, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

The devil tried to bring Jesus over to the dark side. He said, "Hey, man, you can do this. You're powerful. No need for you to be hungry. You've got the power. You can solve this problem." But Jesus knew that the devil offered him a slippery slope. Jesus knew how easy it would be to think he could solve all his problems by himself. Jesus knew that if he fell for the trap, he would become the kind of Messiah that all too many were looking for—a powerful leader who would give the people what they wanted: more, more and more. Remember even his own disciples wanted him to be this kind of Messiah. They didn't want to hear about crucifixion. They wanted to sit at his right and left in the kingdom. Judas betrayed him because he thought Jesus wasn't accomplishing enough for the cause. Jesus could have accepted the devil's invitation; he could have. But then he would have been just one more messiah figure leading his followers to the flames of Masada, losing everything, not even beans to eat, when the good times inevitably waned.

Because Jesus chose to do it differently, when he was coming to his own end, when his heart was in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, he had more than himself to turn to. He could turn to God, just as he had throughout his life. God could give him what neither the world nor he himself could. Not even Jesus could live only by his own devices. Not even Jesus could live by the bread he could make from wheat or stones alone. But even as he drank the cup he was given, even as he was crucified, God lifted him up.

This communion meal we are about to share gathers up these threads in an elegant and simple way. At the last supper Jesus offers his disciples himself as bread and wine. Jesus turns them around and says, this is the bread that sustains you and satisfies your hunger. This is the drink that quenches your thirst. And at the same time he has us share this bread and drink with one another as a double reminder. It reminds us of the gift that only God can give. And it reminds us that as all gifts come from God in one fashion or another, we are to share the bread we have; we are to share those things we possess lest we be tempted to say, "I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!"

When mom used to tell me the "we-ate-beans-all-winter story," it was usually when I complained about having to eat creamed cauliflower yet again. She wanted me to know that it could be a lot worse. She knew from personal experience. But more than that I think she wanted me to know that what we had was a gift by God's grace that we shouldn't take for granted. Gratitude was the proper reaction even to creamed cauliflower, or beans, or manna. Amen.