

Proper 13, Year B
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Saint Ann's, Old Lyme

Give us, we pray, gracious God, grateful hearts,
that we may see your hand in every blessing
and know ourselves to be abundantly fed.

Amen.

Forgotten, it seemed, was the fact that God had delivered them from oppression and slavery; all the Israelites ever seemed to do was complain. "If only we had died ... in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill." And yet, despite their less than gracious behavior, God kept hanging with those ungrateful Israelites. Can you imagine how we human beings might react if we were confronted by that same kind of carping?

Picture a family camping trip - you know, with Mom, Dad, and 2.6 kids. (I need to tell you that this isn't easy for me, because my idea of 'roughing it' is a black and white television in a five star hotel.) In my book, a camping trip is as close as I even want to contemplate to the wilderness experience that the Israelites endured.

Be that as it may, picture our 'happy family'. The minute they park the SUV at the campground, the kids start complaining. 'We wish we'd stayed home; we had television and our computers; and we could eat whenever we wanted, and the food was good, not like this stuff. We'd even rather be in school than here!' Most parents that I know would, at some point in that diatribe, lose their cool and come back at the ungrateful little wretches with something like: 'fine, then, don't appreciate all we do for you, but if you think you're getting anything but peanut butter and jelly for the rest of your life, you have another think coming. Oh, and while we're on the subject, why don't you just keep quiet for a month or two. Oh, yeah, and you're grounded, too, until you're at least 30! That's what we might do, in the face of incessant complaining. But it's not what God does. Listen again to what happened in the story from Exodus, from today's first appointed reading.

After the Israelites had lamented life back in Egypt, and blamed both God and Moses for their present condition, God didn't say something like: 'fine, then, go back to Egypt, for all I care.' Instead, God said: 'I am going to satisfy your hunger.' And in the evening quails came into the camp for their dining, and when morning came manna from heaven covered the ground.

Of course, perfectly in keeping with their less-than-gracious behavior, the first reaction of the Israelites to those gifts from heaven was: 'oh, yuck, what is it?' Well, for all that it's deliciously easy to poke fun of the Israelites, I'm not the first bit sure that we're all that different. Not too long ago, I heard myself complaining - in the absence of a remote control device - about having to walk all the way across the room to change the channel on the television, forgetting how blessed I am to have a television, to say nothing about having electricity. When all we can manage to see is what we don't have, or what we don't like about what we do have, it's really easy to

lose sight of the fact that - like our Israelite ancestors - God keeps feeding us, again and again and again. Now, it is certainly true that God feeds us what we need, and not always what we want. We'd usually like a Big Mac and fries - supersized - while God provides a nice garden salad (with low-fat dressing).

But the reality is that God stays in the business of feeding us even when we behave less than graciously in response. Quails fly into the camp at evening, not because we have earned our daily bread, but because God chooses not to leave us without. The ground is covered with bread - manna - not because we are a prayerful, faithful, or worthy people, but because God simply will not let us go. God keeps feeding us, again and again and again. God loves us too much to let us return to the fleshpots of Egypt and to slavery.

Like the lesson from Exodus, the Gospel lesson for today is all about feeding. It occurs right after the feeding of the 5,000, and Jesus seemed to be chiding the people for caring more about their stomachs than their souls. "Do not work," Jesus cautioned, "for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."

I don't believe for a minute that Jesus was denying our need for food, or was even downplaying the importance of the food that feeds our bodies. After all, he had just finished catering a banquet for over 5,000 people. But Jesus is inviting us to refocus - to redirect our hearts and minds toward God - to concentrate less on ourselves and what we might want (Big Macs and French fries) and to focus instead on the Giver.

There is a wonderful story - and it's a true story - about such a refocus toward God. It involved an Episcopal priest, who - before her retirement - had been the Rector of a church here in New England. Well, apparently one member of the parish where she served had a nasty streak about a mile and a quarter wide. He could be (and often was, I gather) a real pill, with hardly a nice word for anyone - or anything. And most of his complaints, it seemed, tended to center on such vital issues as whether or not the altar silver was adequately polished or whose child was much too restless in church.

Well, one day, this Rector was telling a small group of colleagues about a particularly vicious diatribe by this man, and after listening for a while, somebody asked: 'how do you put up with him?' To her great credit, she didn't even have to pause and ponder before she replied: 'because God puts up with me'.

In that response was an acknowledgment that God has been vastly generous to her. And while she was not above complaining about this dreary person, there's a broader context that informed her. She was focused on God - the Giver, so even though that man could be a real pill, he couldn't overshadow her awareness of her many God-given blessings.

The point is that while we might be inclined to see what we don't have, God gives us all that we really need. The point is that God does feed us. And God will continue to feed us. That's the promise. When Jesus feeds us with his very self, when we take his body into our bodies, it means that no matter what else happens, we will be fed, because God is with us. It also means

that no matter what, God is going to hang with us, just like those Israelites, to deliver us from the bondage of whatever is oppressive or enslaving. Not of our virtue - we're often too busy complaining - but from God's unwavering love does God promise to feed us. Jesus lived and died to guarantee that promise, and God hopes that we will not only rejoice in the promise but also that we share that promise with others.

Amen.

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