

Manna: What is it? Exodus 16:1-15

Bizarre Food

I have been living in the United States about 12 years. One of the best things about living in the United States is that I can easily find and taste different ethnic foods since the United States is a multicultural society. Do you like to try new foods? If so, let me introduce you to a very distinctive Korean food. [picture] You don't know what it is but I can guarantee you will see those things on the plate wriggling. I was probably 7 years old when I first saw this food and I cried because the food, which was supposed to stay on the plate, seemed still alive and trying to escape from my plate and mouth. [ppt] This dish is San-nakji, live octopus. Like sashimi, it is a raw dish made with long armed octopus. Although an octopus is commonly killed before being cut into small pieces and served, the pieces of octopus can still move due to nerve activity posthumously. It tastes good anyway.

What would your reaction be if this dish was on your dinner table? Some of you would be terrified. I am pretty sure you would say, "What is it?!" When we see something completely new and unfamiliar, we ask, "What is it?" When we encounter something incomprehensible, we say, "What is it?" It was the same with the Israelites. "What is it?" was the first reaction of the Israelites when they first saw Manna.

From the Empire into the Wilderness

After departing from Egypt, the Israelites marched to the promised land where milk and honey would flow. They had an excellent GPS for their final destination. Pillars of fire and clouds guided their journey. But a good GPS with points of interest highlighted in color was not enough for good travel. What else did they need for their long-distance journey? Food. After 6 weeks of marching in the wilderness, all the foods they had brought from Egypt were gone and they weren't sure where their next meal would come from. They were hungry. As their stomachs rumbled, they grumbled and complained against Moses and Aaron.

The worst part of their complaint was that they distorted their memory of slavery in Egypt. They were looking back on slavery and oppression; and suddenly, because they were hungry, it began to look good to them. [ppt] They remembered their time in the Egyptian empire like they were at some sort of vacation resort, lounging by some pool dining on overladen buffets. They said, "We sat by pots of meat and piles of bread." They seemed to forget that they were slaves there. They had to endure the brutal whip of their masters and barely survived on the crumbs from their master's table. But their hunger and, more fundamentally, their feeling of insecurity about an uncertain future caused them to settle for less than what God had intended for them. God wanted them to be free people of God but they wanted to go back to live as slaves... as property of their masters, because it seemed to provide relative security for their lives. Their bodies had been freed but their souls were still bound to their old masters. They still didn't completely trust God.

A Capitalism: The Slave Master of Our Time

I believe we often have similar experiences to the Israelites on our spiritual journey. We know the way of life Jesus Christ taught us. The way of life is the life of loving, sharing, smiling, caring, serving, forgiving, laughing, hugging, helping, trusting, healing and even more loving.

We choose to live this way of life but like the Israelites, we are also not completely free from our old bondages.

Eugene McCarragher, associate Professor of Humanities at Villanova University, wrote a very interesting article. The title of the article is “You’re a Slave to Money, Then You Die.”¹ If you like reading, I highly recommend it to you. We often assume capitalism and neoliberalism are only economic and political systems but he points out capitalism has become the religion of modernity with money as its deity. Like a religion, capitalism has its own cosmology, understanding of personhood, rituals and moral codes. He said, “The world is a business; money is the sacramental token, the *mana*, [the power that moves the world], the Market is the *atomic and subatomic structure* of things.”² Money not only moves the world but it also becomes the measure of success. In capitalist society, human beings are cast in the image of the market so human beings are basically understood as a human resource and human capital that is replicable. So you are expected to upgrade your skills, your profile, and your resume to make yourselves more attractive and useful. He said, “Neoliberal culture exhibits a punitive sado-moralism toward the poor and the weak.”³

A good example is reality television. What is your favorite reality show? Mine is “Chopped” on the Food Network. [ppt] Have you watched this show? Four chefs face off against one another in a cooking competition for a \$ 10,000 reward. In each round, a panel of three guest judges “chops” one chef in terms of taste, presentation and creativity of their foods. What awaits the loser? Cruelty and humiliation. We, Christians, are not completely free from this destructive influence of idolatrous neoliberal culture.

We know that our lives should be run by the logic of self-giving and sacrificial love but we also have to consider the financial conditions. The church is no exception. The church has to pay staff-salaries, utility bills, insurance and building maintenance costs. We have to balance between helping others and our own expenditures. This is our predicament. Just like the Israelites, on our spiritual journey, we often find ourselves being caught up between God’s calling for new life and practical and financial concerns. It’s hard to be faithful when you are hungry.

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The good news is that God knows our struggles. As the Israelites complained about the lack of bread and didn’t trust God, God was not angry, rather, God provided for their need. God told Moses, “I’m going to rain bread down from the skies for you. The people will go out and gather each day’s ration” and God gave them manna. What was people’s reaction when they first saw it? “They said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.” (v.15) “What is it?” in Hebrew is Man hu, that is the origin of the name “manna.” Manna was a sign of God’s providence and the invitation to a deeper faith in God and a new way of life, the life under God’s abundance and generosity.

What was the basic rule of collecting Manna? People should gather manna enough for that day. They should not hoard manna for the next days or the uncertain future. This is a very different economic principle from economic rules of our day. God didn’t say “The more, the better” but God wants us to trust God’s provision and be satisfied with our daily bread. While our society and economy are run by the scarcity principle, God’s economy is marked by God’s

¹ <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/youre-a-slave-to-money-then-you-die/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

abundance and generosity. What we need is trust in God's abundance and faithfulness, and to reorient our lives in accordance with God's promise. This sounds too idealistic to follow. Right? I am with you. But we also know, it is the right way and the way of life.

How can we trust God's promise and provision? We can trust God by tasting manna in our daily lives. To taste manna, we have to first collect it. As I have said, the origin of the word "Manna" comes from "What is it?" Our faith journey is sustained by this question. More specifically the question, "What is it that God is doing in our midst?" We need to keep asking, "What is it? What is it that God is doing in our midst?" As we discover what God is doing, we are able to see and taste God's abundance and that experience leads us into deeper trust in God and the way of new life. We may glimpse how new life in God looks through those who have tasted manna.

I told you "Chopped" on the Food Network is my favorite reality show. I like watching people creating excellent food within a limited time with limited ingredients. It's an exciting show. In one episode, I was very moved by a chef. In the final round of that episode, chef Magris and chef Nitahara competed with one another. Chef Magris wanted to fly home to France to visit her ill grandmother and this was her last chance to earn the money to see her grandmother before her final departure. She made mistakes in the second round and severely burned herself, but she did her best to win. Sadly, she lost and chef Nitahara won the final. Normally, when the winner is named, the show ends with the winner speaking about how they have worked hard and are proud of themselves, but this episode was different. From the very beginning to the end, chef Nitahara made it explicit that he was doing it for the glory of God. When he knew he won the competition, he said to chef Magris, "I didn't expect to win so I wasn't expecting to get the money anyway so you know what... you deserve to see your grandma. I will give you the ticket.... Like we talked about we both are winners." All the people in the studio were moved by his action of generosity and kindness.

In his final interview, chef Nitahara said, before he met God, he was a jerk who always tried to step over other people. But after knowing God, he discovered a higher purpose beyond winning. Chef Nitahara's single act of kindness did not change the world or a culture that only values winning but by his act of generosity and kindness, he was able to show there are things more important than winning and what it means to truly be a human rather than human capital.

I believe that we, Christians, are called to show the world glimpses of God's purpose and what a new life in Christ looks like. When they see it, they will say, "manna, what is it?" because it looks strange and unfamiliar. But as they taste this bread of life, they will also join our pilgrimage toward the promised land. Asbury UMC has been faithful in sharing 'manna' with those in need.

When the pandemic hit the world, coronavirus turned many people into survivalist and hoarders. It's our natural instinct to prepare for an uncertain future. But our Asbury family didn't hesitate to reach out our neighbors who were in a dire situation. As soon as I shared the concern about a severe food shortage in Guatemala, the Asbury family gathered manna and shared it with people in Guatemala through Healing Guatemala. [ppt] It helped hundreds of people to have their daily bread in a difficult time. I believe your act of kindness and generosity in this time of pandemic was also your confession of faith in God's abundance and generosity.

My friends, our life-long journey is sustained by the bread from heaven, manna. God will provide for our needs at the right moment. So, let us not be afraid of going through this Covid-19 wilderness, but continue to seek for what God is doing in our midst today and share the manna

you taste. In fact, Providence is the capital city of our state. Right? Trust God and God will provide! Aman.