

St Thomas's Episcopal Church
Sermon - Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost - 24 September 2023
Reference: Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

God grants me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

(The Serenity Prayer).

This is the season of creation when we remind ourselves and celebrate God's creation. We all need to realize and know everything around us, the green grass and trees, plants, and animals; God is the author and creator. God created humans in God's very image. God, call it "good".

The common thread in today's Old Testament reading is "Entitlement."

In the Exodus story, the Israelites said to Moses, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." They are angry.

In the Old Testament book of Numbers, we read another version of this story: The Israelites say to Moses "in Egypt: "We remember the fish we ate free in **Mitz-ray-im** also the cucumber, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic" (Numbers 11:5). Now in their hunger they think of these tasty vegetables they once ate in Egypt. They have forgotten about the days of their slavery in Egypt.

In this event, what matters is a contrast of their memory with their present reality when they doubt their leaders and God. God and Moses, who did so much for these people!

The Israelites thought they were entitled to good food even in the wilderness.

We expect God's wrath and anger towards these people in such an environment.

However, our God is a loving creator of the Universe, and God meets where we are to meet our needs.

God responds to their requests, not with anger or punishment, but by feeding them. God says, "I am making it rain bread from the heavens," providing food for the people's hunger in the form of meat that evening and bread each morning. This bread, called "manna," becomes the typical food of faith.

Because of its name, “mana” in Hebrew means “what is it?” we don’t specifically know the contents of manna. We were told it was sweet and looked like tiny white coriander seeds. Some have indicated it was made from a sweet beetle cocoon that grows on green leaves in desert plants. God created the plants and all the green vegetation that provided the manna.

The Israelites in the desert claimed entitlement. This can be compared to people who grow up in a relatively comfortable environment. When people grow up comfortable, they think they are entitled and deserve comfort. They believe they have a special right. For example, if we work in an office environment, we would be offended if we didn’t get a bonus or raise. We all think we deserve just a bit more; this creates a high degree of unhappiness if we fail to achieve it.

Somehow, the miracle of the manna that fell from heaven each day in the wilderness did not satisfy the Israelites’ hunger for security.

They missed the predictability and sense of control they felt in Egypt—where everything was known. Though the Egyptians oppressed them and made life miserable, the Israelites looked back on their time in Egypt as something predictable now; they could not bear the uncertainty they faced as a free people.

Many times, the price of freedom is uncertain and unpredictable. One of the first lessons we must learn to be “free” is to “bear” uncertainty and trust in the unknown.

In this biblical story, God’s providence to the Israelites and feeding them with manna was a teaching moment. Each day for forty years, the Israelites would have to go out and gather their daily supply of manna—just enough for that day. The next occurrence was uncertain, but God used God’s creation to provide. In Exodus 15:13, we read, “That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning, there was a layer of dew around the camp.” God used nature, birds, and the environment God’s creation to provide.

The manna challenged the Israelites to develop a fresh way of thinking—to experience something new and fresh—a lesson of dependence on God’s providence.

Israelites instead of seeking the answers, the manna taught the Israelites to live with the questions continually.

They realized the journey to freedom is to remain alert and curious and go on one step at a time. We would call this **reaction a sense of entitlement**.

This story is told by a US Seminary student, Sarah, who was doing a one-month study in the Dominican Republic and asked the priest at the church she was serving, "Tell me about the faith of your people. Why is it so strong?" He said, "Sarah, in the Dominican Republic, we have so little, and life is so hard that we know how much we depend on God; in your country, you have so much you think you don't need God."

There's only one way to eliminate greed for power and entitlement. We must experience undeserved love at the very depth of our lives. Where we didn't merit or worthy of it, we were unworthy of it anyway, got it. **That's called mercy**. God offers this love to us; we are reminded of this on Sundays at the Holy Eucharist.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus compares the parable to the "Kingdom of Heaven." The laborers who arrived at the first hour of the day thought they were entitled to higher pay than the fair pay they agreed with. In this passage, Jesus says, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:16).

In our Christian life, we better be ready to be surprised. The way most of us measure things—especially if we are privileged and comfortable—from an entitlement point of view is not how things work out.

The laborers who came first were expecting to be paid more. We need to "Stop expecting!" Jesus was trying to convey that everything we receive is a gift. For example, the reason we woke up this morning had very little to do with us everything to do with God and the gift of lives God gives us.

All twenty-four hours today are total gift. And so, the only real thing to say is, "Thank you!" to God for life and sustenance. We say this is from the "grace of God."

This is the beautiful word "grace". The church's Catechism defines "Grace" as God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace, God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills. (BCP, p.858). **Amen**.