

“Taking and Receiving”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Genesis 22:1-14

October 1, 2017 - World Communion Sunday

In the 1960s and 70s, psychologist Walter Mischel led something called the “Stanford marshmallow experiment” in which children were brought into a room and presented a marshmallow — or a pretzel or even an Oreo — and told that they could have that treat now. Or! Or they could wait fifteen minutes, and get two marshmallows or pretzels or Oreos. The youngest kids were eating within seconds. But Mischel found that by about age four, kids got a lot better at delayed gratification. They had learned how to wait and gained tools to get through the agonizing quarter hour. Well, some of them did. Some of the older kids struggled, but made it to the second marshmallow bonus. Others struggled, but couldn’t do it. They did their best to wait, but ultimately took the first marshmallow. Follow-up studies discovered that the kids who had acquired the skills needed to get that second marshmallow ended up with better test scores, fewer school suspensions, and eventually, better jobs.¹

And then there are the Israelites. They’ve just been liberated from slavery in Egypt, but now they are refugees in the wilderness, without a sustainable source of food. And the complaining begins:

“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 [Moses and Aaron] have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

In response, God says, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you.” God will provide what they need. The Israelite’s reaction to the flaky white substance that covered the ground like dew is to ask: “man-hu?” which roughly translates to “what the heck is this stuff?”

God has provided. But God doesn’t just give the people manna and leave it at that. No, there’s a lesson here. God provides enough. They can’t hoard it — it spoils if they try. They can’t be left in the dust by faster manna gatherers, because it all ends up weighed out the same. Everyone ends up with enough. They cannot take the manna. They can only receive it as the gift that it is.

My theory is that God is attempting some parenting ninja moves here. God has a people for whom nothing is ever enough and God is determined to turn them into a *people of enough*. They are understandably in survival mode and have been through the trauma of slavery and being chased by Pharaoh’s army and they could easily become scavengers and takers. But God has bigger plans than survival. God wants to teach them patience and trust and how to receive.

The people shake their fists at Moses and shout “Look around, look around, at how miserable it is out

¹<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91894-mischels-marshmallows/>

here! At least we had food when we were enslaved! We should have died that way, without freedom and full of Egyptian bread. That would be enough.”

You know the difference between an attitude of taking and one of receiving. It’s the difference between knocking someone over to get that last loaf of bread when the storm is coming and having a loaf given to you by a neighbor who has more than enough. It’s the difference between seeing the world as a war zone — or the wild west filled with bandits — and seeing the world as a gift from God.

There’s a Passover song that tells of the miraculous gifts God gave to the people of the covenant. Each verse remembers a gift and then receives it: If God had brought us out of Egypt...*dayenu* — *it would have sufficed. That would be enough.* If God had split the sea for us...*dayenu*. If God had given us the sabbath...*dayenu*. If God had given us the Torah...*dayenu*. With manna from above, God is teaching to the people to open their fists and shout to the sky and sing “Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now!”

So much of our worship together is about learning to receive. This is profoundly counter-cultural. We are used to consuming what we want, when we want it, with whomever we choose at our right hand. But Church isn’t like that. This is not a gas station, where you pull in and fill up with grace and forgiveness that you extract from a tank. This is something much more sacred and messy. Here you don’t get to choose who sits next to you. You come here with whatever has happened in your life during the week, and it smashes into whatever happened to your neighbor, and sometimes that’s uncomfortable and at other times it’s nothing less than a gift from God, enough to get through the day.

World Communion Sunday is easy to undersell in a congregation where we come to the Lord’s Table each week. Many Protestants — and most Presbyterians! — don’t do that. But today, we all feast. Today we remember how on his last night of freedom, Jesus knew that they were coming. They were coming to take him. They were coming to take power back from the rabble rousing rabbi. They were coming to take his life. And on this last night, he ate with his friends, each of whom had had their own week of stress and worry, and he gave them bread and cup and asked them to receive eternal life and peace and to trust that these would be enough.

We will amble up to this table, the lurching, gangly, limping, skipping, twirling body of Christ. Paul calls us this — the body of Christ — in the twelfth chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians. He tells us that we are all part of the body, and that we need each other. The body of Christ moves awkwardly, because we do tend to pull in different directions. If you are one eye and I am the other eye and they are a foot and she is an elbow, we might not all end up agreeing on where to focus, where to step, how to lean.

That body gets especially unruly and threatens to tear itself apart when we approach the world as takers. Freedom and news and opinions and resources and bodies are consumed and treated as disposable, not approached with fear and trembling, as gifts to be received. Imagine how much better we might be negotiating the deep divisions in our nation right now if we all — without losing our

passion and our brains and our moral compasses — saw one another as a gift from God, to be received with gratitude.

“Be what you see. Receive what you are.” St. Augustine exhorted his hearers to take the bread, the body of Christ, and to be that bread for others as they go out to live in the world.² What a gift we have received.

It was the middle of her Maundy Thursday sermon when the Rev. Eugenia Gamble — formerly the pastor of First Presbyterian, Birmingham — spotted the visitor. He was scruffy and unkempt and he’d almost certainly been sleeping on the street. He slowly made his way to the front of the sanctuary, plopped down into a pew, and looked around with a dazed expression on his face.

After the sermon, it was time for the Lord’s Supper, and Eugenia issued the invitation to the table. When she called the congregation forward to receive the elements, the man looked around, unsure. She wondered if he didn’t know what to do. She wondered if he was afraid that the “gifts of God for the people of God” didn’t include him. A member of the church went to the man and urged him forward. The man took off his hat and shuffled to the table. Eugenia offered him “The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” The church member whispered to the man, telling him to tear a piece and dip it. He did.

A big ol’ hunk. “A worthy hunk,” in Eugenia’s words. He stood there and ate it and chewed loudly looked her straight in the eye and gulped. Then he spoke: “This is so good! So sweet and good!” The congregation took a collective breath, and then sighed. “Yes, this *is* so good, so sweet and good,” they seemed to be realizing.

The man stood still, and just as Eugenia was about to nudge him, he asked, “May I have some more? I am so hungry.” He meant belly hunger, of course, but the deep hunger of humanity hung in the air. Eugenia answered him, “When everyone has had a little, you may have the rest.” “Thank you, ma’am,” he replied. The rest of the congregation received the bread of heaven, the elders were served. Eugenia savored the bread like never before. She took the rest of the loaf and gave it to the man, and all through the prayers and the closing hymn and the benediction, he sat and ate and said again and again, “Mmmm, Mmmm, Mmmm. So Sweet. So Sweet.”³

² Augustine, “Your Own Myster,” in *Assembly*, 23:2

³ Eugenia Gamble, “Among the Ribbons,” *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts* 42:3